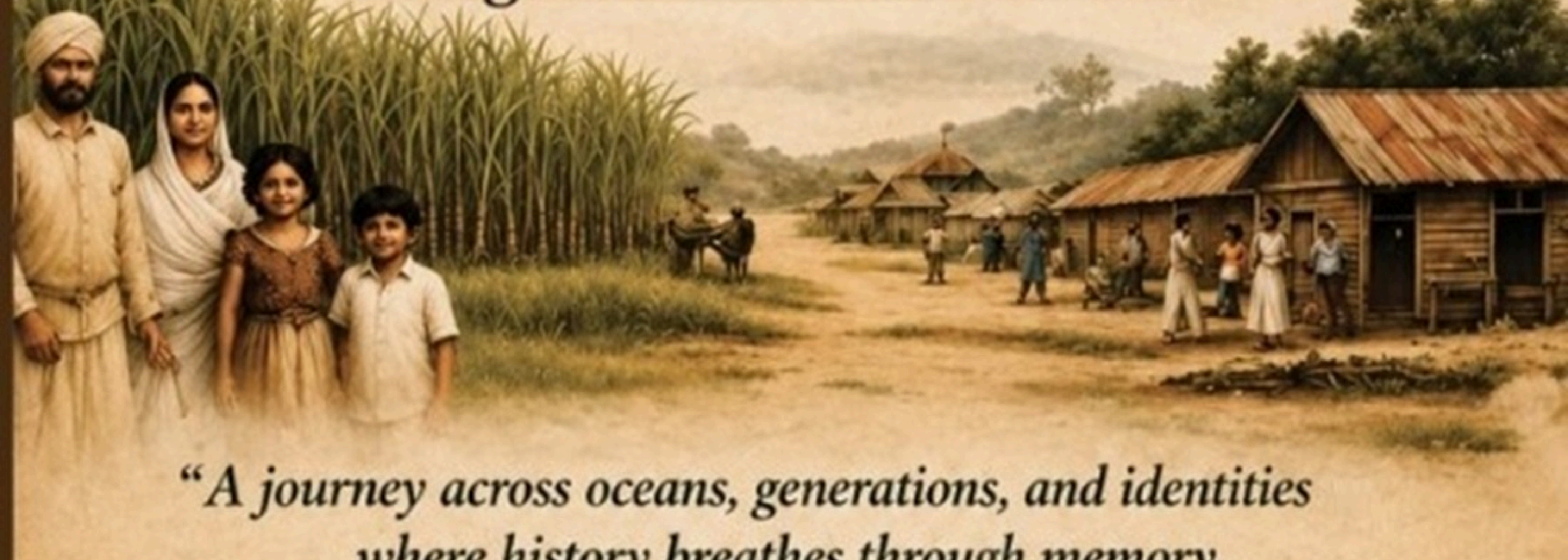
FROM RAMNAGAR TO GANDHI VILLAGE

A Story of Resilience and Survival of Indians in Trinidad

By

Adeel Ajaz Rahi

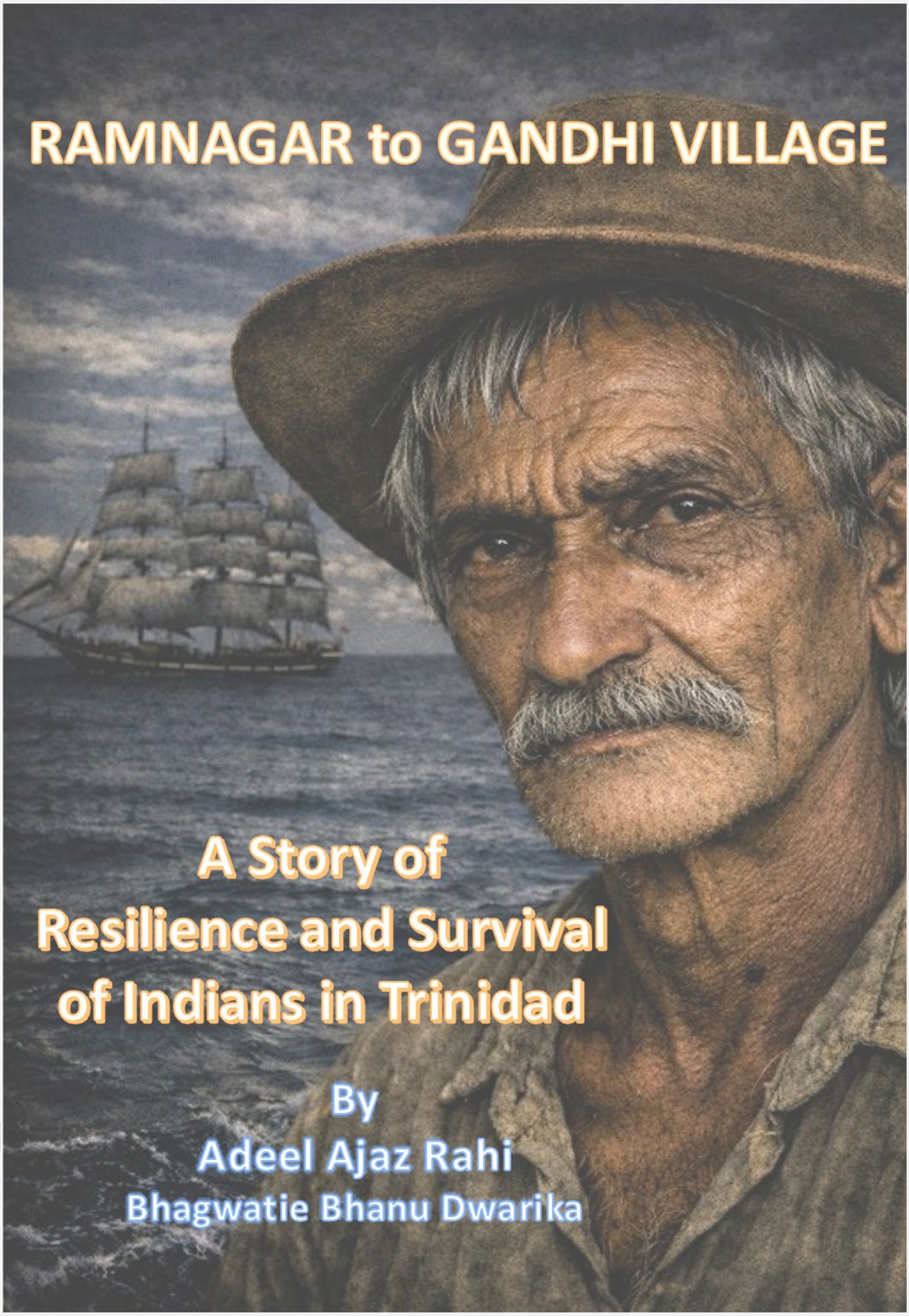
Bhagwatie Bhanu Dwarika



"A journey across oceans, generations, and identities where history breathes through memory, and survival becomes legacy."

First Edition

From Ramnagar
to
Gandhi Village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"Dedicated to Ramadhin Ramsahai, who left Ramnagar with a pouch of soil, and to all who turned Gandhi Village into a home."

Book Detail

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Central Idea of the Book

“The fragrance of soil never fades; it only migrates from one shore to another.”

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Closing Line

"The fragrance of soil never fades; it only migrates from one shore to another."

AUTHOR's NOTE

This book was born from a question that hovered like a whisper in the winds of Gandhi Village, Trinidad, for more than a century:

"Who were we, before we became who we are?"

What follows is not a record of migration alone, nor only a family chronicle. It is the story of a young farmer, Ramadhin Ramsahai, an Ahir by caste, who in 1898 left the soil of Ramnagar near Allahabad, braved the dreaded *Kala Pani* aboard the ship *RHONI*, and sowed the seeds of a new India on the distant shores of Trinidad. It is a story of exile and yearning, of chains both visible and unseen, and, ultimately, of a spirit that transformed colonial bondage into a legacy of dignity, prosperity, and cultural pride.

For generations, the Girmitiyas, the indentured laborers who sustained Britain's post emancipation empire, were reduced to numbers in immigration registers and plantation ledgers. Yet their songs, sacrifices, quiet defiance, and boundless love for a homeland they could never return to endured in *birha* verses, in rituals of worship, and in stories whispered from grandmother to grandchild. This book seeks to bring those voices out of the margins and into the light.

My journey into this history began not in archives, but in the living memory of a family whose roots stretch from the courtyards of Ramnagar to the vibrant lanes of Gandhi Village. Through the tireless devotion of Bhagwatie Bhanu Dwarika, who, armed with yellowed letters and an unyielding sense of purpose traced her ancestry across the ocean. The scattered fragments of this story were gathered into a single narrative. Her quest, spanning decades and continents, reopened doors long sealed by silence and distance.

This work is an offering to that legacy. Drawing upon records, oral traditions, folk songs, and lived experience, it traces the arc of the indentured journey from nineteenth century Uttar Pradesh to the flourishing of Indo Trinidadian identity today. It tells of caste walls dissolving in the ship's hold, of music as solace and resistance, of Cooliewood reborn as Gandhi Village, and of descendants who rose from cane fields to become leaders, artists, and global citizens.

This is not only a Trinidadian story, nor only an Indian one. It is a testament to the resilience of hope. Every migration carries the ache of separation and the promise of renewal. Every displaced family carries forward an invisible bundle of soil, tradition, and memory. This book is for all who have ever wondered where they come from, and for all who believe that the past, when honored, becomes a foundation rather than a burden.

A Note on Sources and Reconstruction

This story rests upon a tapestry woven from both record and remembrance. Colonial registers, shipping manifests, immigration passes, and legal documents provide the skeletal frame of Ramadhin Ramsahai's journey. Yet bones alone cannot breathe.

To recover the pulse of lived experience, the farewell rituals, the songs sung at departure, the hushed conversations in the ship's hold, I have also drawn upon oral traditions carried across generations, upon folk songs preserved in the Indo Trinidadian community, and upon the cultural memory of journeys echoed throughout the Girmitiya diaspora.

Where the archive falls silent and memory endures, this book does not claim the finality of documentary certainty. Instead, it offers a recreation grounded in history, sustained by cultural continuity, and illuminated by the emotional truth that survives in the stories elders tell.

In this sense, the work aspires not to documentary closure, but to what V. S. Naipaul called *"the truth of the imagination,"* a truth that honors what the archive cannot capture. The photographs, letters, and heirlooms included in the *Gallery of Memories* are authentic, preserved across oceans and generations. They speak in ways words cannot.

Special Thanks

No acknowledgment could ever be complete without a radiant tribute to Bhagwatie Bhanu Dwarika, the co-author of this work, my sister-in-law from New York, a visionary, a poet of memory, and the guardian of our ancestral flame. She is not simply a contributor. She stands as co-author, the one who first heard the echo of Ramnagar across oceans and centuries, and who had the courage to follow that call when others only dreamed.

Long before these pages took form, Bhagwatie had already begun the sacred labor of preservation. It was she who cradled the yellowed letters, the fragile photographs, and the whispered family histories that might otherwise have dissolved into silence. It was she who journeyed back to Ramnagar in 1982 and again in 2007, not only as a pilgrim but as a bridge builder, restoring ties that colonialism had severed and giving every descendant a path back to the soil of origin.

Her devotion is more than genealogical. It is spiritual. She embodies that rare union of intellectual rigor and emotional depth, a soul who understands that history is not only recorded, but lived, sung, and remembered. A poet in her own right, she has the gift of breathing life into memory, of turning fragments into whole narratives, of seeing in every faded photograph the pulse of a thousand stories.

Bhagwatie's vision extended beyond her own search. She knew this story belonged not to one family alone, but to all whose ancestors crossed the *Kala Pani*. Through her encouragement, her research, and her unwavering belief that these voices deserved to be heard, she lit the path I have had the privilege to follow.

This book exists because Bhagwatie Bhanu Dwarika refused to let our ancestors be forgotten. To her, I offer not only gratitude, but reverence. She is the keeper of our legacy, the architect of remembrance, and the living testament that one determined soul can rescue an entire history from the shadows.

About the Author

Based in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, Adeel Ajaz is a professional in the airline industry with extensive expertise in aviation, cargo, and charter operations. Alongside his corporate career, he is also a seasoned columnist and writer, with nearly twenty years of contributions to leading newspapers and international platforms. As the son of Dr. Ajaz Rahi, a distinguished Urdu literary scholar and author whose works span novels, poetry, and critical research, Adeel inherited a deep devotion to language, heritage, and culture. Writing, a lifelong passion, beautifully complements his professional journey.

Adeel Ajaz, writing under the pen name Adeel Ajaz Rahi, is a master of the written word. In his early career, his voice was defined by sharp political insight. Writing for prominent dailies such as *Daily Pakistan*, *Nawa i Waqt*, and *Ausaf*, he closely examined the complex currents of power, governance, and national policy. Over time, his focus turned toward the deeper and more enduring waters of literature and culture, a shift born of a profound devotion to questions of identity, memory, and the human condition. Today, his writing bridges contemporary realities and the timeless cultural heritage of South Asia.

Beyond his columns, Adeel is also an accomplished short story writer. He has written several evocative stories, sharing them directly with his readers through his personal blog and Facebook page. These digital spaces serve as a modern canvas for his fiction, allowing him to connect intimately with readers and explore human emotion in a more personal narrative form.

In an era when traditional newspaper readership has declined, Adeel recognizes that vital opportunities have emerged through online platforms. Social media has become a powerful space for literary figures to share their voices and preserve the richness of Urdu literature. He is currently developing a digital series of writings with the aim of compiling them into a book featuring insights on 101 distinguished individuals. This initiative reflects the evolving landscape of literature, carrying forward a legacy once rooted exclusively in print.

Today, Adeel Ajaz Rahi's words travel across continents, appearing in blogs, online journals, and international magazines. Translated into Urdu, English, Hindi, Bhojpuri, Spanish, and French, his writings resonate across diverse audiences, bridging languages and geographies.

This book represents the convergence of lifelong passions: the rigor of research, the artistry of storytelling, and the conviction that the past, when honored, becomes a lantern for the future. In these pages, we do more than recount history. We breathe life into memory. By weaving together fact and feeling, archive and imagination, we create a narrative that stands as both testament and prayer.

Closing Prayer

This book is offered as a prayer for the souls who never returned, for the mothers who sang lullabies in alien barracks, and for the fathers who bent beneath the cane so their grandchildren might walk free.

May their sacrifices never fade.

May their legacy bloom wherever the fragrance of their soil endures.

May remembrance itself become a garden where dignity blossoms and hope endures across generations.

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PREFACE - *Threads of History*

As far back as memory allows, I recall my grandfather speaking of India with a tenderness that revealed only beauty and goodness. As a child, having neither read about India nor seen its films, I grew up believing that everything in that land was perfect.

Daada, as we lovingly called him, would gather us most evenings for *kheesa* time, storytelling sessions filled with tales of Ram, his siblings, and other great figures from mythological times. With his *angocha* in hand to brush away wandering mosquitoes, he repeated two lines that became etched in my heart:

"Raghukul reeti sadaa chalee aayee,
Praan jayee par vachan na jayee."

The essence was clear: the sanctity of one's word must be upheld, even at the cost of life itself. That principle, instilled during those evenings, became the foundation of everything I would later undertake.

My Educational Journey

My life has been a tapestry of learning, service, and cultural exchange. For decades, I have taught, coordinated, and nurtured education across continents, beginning in Trinidad and Tobago, extending through Venezuela and Spain, and continuing into the United States. Each place added a new thread to the fabric of my experience, enriching both my professional path and my personal growth.

Languages became my bridges across cultures. My fluency in Spanish and French, along with my understanding of Urdu, Bengali, and Hindi, allowed me to connect with diverse communities, to listen deeply, and to teach with empathy.

Beyond classrooms and institutions, my journey has been one of nurturing human potential. Looking back, I see my path as a continuous weaving of service and scholarship, where every lesson taught and every culture embraced has strengthened the fabric of my life. My commitment remains to honor this legacy of learning and to continue building bridges that unite people through education.

My Journey: From Silent Letters to Sacred Return

A fragile bundle of letters, tied with cotton long faded to the color of dust. They had been written to my great-grandfather, Ramadhin Ramsahai, after he left India in 1898.

No one remembers who first carried them across the black water. But they arrived, and they stayed.

My grandfather, Ramawad Ramadhin, kept them in a canvas shoulder bag, hidden among other papers he could not read, yet could not throw away. The envelopes bore dates from the early 1900s.

The script was foreign. No one in our family, no one in our village in Trinidad, no one in the entire stretch of our knowing, could decipher a single line.

They were voices trapped in ink. They were waiting, and I did not know it yet, but I had been born to listen.

FROM RAMNAGAR TO GANDHI VILLAGE

My grandmother placed these letters like precious jewels in the hands of my younger sister, Sita, when she was leaving Trinidad for London. Perhaps in that great city, she said, someone will recognize the script. Perhaps we may get some clues to connect us again.

But London was also silent.

Years passed. The letters traveled once more, this time to me, in New York, in 1979. I was a student then, young enough to believe that every question had an answer. I carried them to the Consulate of India. A kind man named Mr. Nair turned them over in his hands, offering fragments: This word might mean… This name could be… But no translation. No song.

This was before search engines. Before the world lived inside a screen. Research then meant patience. It meant walking into a room and asking a stranger for help. It meant not giving up.

In 1982, I flew to India with one clue burning in my pocket: Sultanpur.

The letters had been mailed from its police station. I arrived like a pilgrim with no map. The officers there had never seen a Trinidad passport before. They stared at it as if it were a letter from the moon. They warned me about dacoits, bandits who roamed the roads, and assigned two constables to guard me.

I hired a minivan to travel safely, but the hired vehicle broke down before we had gone a mile. A decorated bullock cart replaced the van.

I climbed onto it, a woman from across the black water, sitting on wooden slats, moving at the speed of an old prayer. Children ran alongside, shouting, laughing. They had never seen anyone like me. I had never felt so far from home or so close to it.

The village chief gathered everyone beneath a large shed. I walked through the settlement and saw how many adults suffered untreated eye infections. In one hut, an old man offered me puffed rice and a hard brown sugar ball wrapped in newspaper. His hands trembled as he gave it.

I tasted it.

And there it was: *moorhee, bheli* — the exact taste of my Trinidad childhood. My grandmother's hands. My mother's kitchen. The sugar melted on my tongue, and I understood: memory does not need passports.

Expanding the Search

That first pilgrimage opened a door.

I began to research in earnest everything about the indentured workers, their ships, their contracts, their names misspelled by British clerks.

In Trinidad, I found myself alone in the Customs and Excise Office, standing in front of metal cabinets, pulling down documents no one had touched in decades. Pages torn, others missing. I thought: This is our history, and it is falling apart.

In that moment, I made a vow: I would not let these voices disappear.

Mauritius came next. At the Mahatma Gandhi Institute and the Bhojpuri Institute, scholars treated my questions like sacred things. Dr. Sarita Boodhoo walked with me through villages, teaching me to see what was still alive: the old songs, the old rituals, the old names. I met the Ramlallah family, founders of the *Mauritius Times*. I sat in Belle Terre with Harish Boodhoo, former Deputy Prime Minister, who spoke of activism as if it were a form of love.

Even the Prime Minister, Sir Anerood Jugnauth, and his wife, Sarojini, opened their home to me. They offered tea and grace. She looked at me not as a stranger, but as family.

In Mauritius, I learned that the descendants of the *Girmitiyas* had built something beautiful. They had kept the flame alive.

From Ramnagr to Gandhi Village

In the 1980s New York was for me electric with Indo-Caribbean activity.

In February 1985, with the support of Vishnu Bisram, Baytoram Ramharack, Mahadai Das, and Gora Singh, a meeting was organized with all known Indo-Caribbean leaders in New York.

We gathered on Hillside Avenue in Queens. I had the honor of chairing that meeting. Ramesh Kallicharran, well-known realtor and activist gave us his space, his food, his blessing.

That night, we planted the seed of what would become the Indo-Caribbean Federation of North America.

That same year, I met in New York, the accomplished descendent of indentured ancestry, Prime Minister Dr. Cheddi Jagan of Guyana. No fanfare. No cameras. Just a man who had given his life to his people, speaking softly about freedom.

And then there was Mohammed Saffarally, a migrant from Gasparillo, Trinidad, who carried an entire culture in his suitcase. He gave me his personal copy of the commemorative centenary book on Indian arrival in Trinidad. This book was not available in bookstores.

He introduced the *Tazia* procession to Manhattan. He helped build the first Hindu temple launched by Indo-Trinidadians in New York. He was not wealthy. But he was rich in the only way that matters: he knew who he was, and he wanted everyone else to know too.

Sacred Return

In 2000, I met Shamshu Dean, a genealogist from Trinidad. He helped me find what I had been searching for all along: surviving relatives in India. My elder sisters and my brother Ramnarace worked with him, fine-tuning landing documents, cross-checking names, and following the invisible threads of blood and memory.

In 2007, I returned to India, to the village of Ramnagar, as mentioned in the landing document of my great-grandfather, Ramadhin Ramsahai.

FROM RAMNAGAR TO GANDHI VILLAGE

This time, I brought my children. We traveled many long hours together on a heavily packed train from Delhi to Allahabad, arriving early in the morning. Mr. Arvin Abhayraj, school principal from Ramnagar, was waiting for us at the crowded train platform.

After a few minutes in the car, he pulled over in front of a small wooden shop. Inside, the floor had small puddles of water, evidence that it had just been washed. Mr. Arvin ordered, and we stood to the side. An amazing breakfast of hot *jalebi* and fresh cow's milk was served. Strange for us, but very delicious. My children licked their fingers and spoke about it while we drove the next hour to the village.

There were no hotels or rest houses in the village. We were Arvin Kumar's guests. His residence was on the second floor of a large rectangular building that housed a school on the first floor. His wife and daughter warmly received us and shyly walked farther inside to a gently lit bedroom with two large, high wooden beds. Shortly after, a familiar aroma floated in.

We sat down to a simple meal: *dal*, rice, fried okra. My children tasted it and looked up at me. It tastes like home, they said, and I smiled because I knew what they meant. The taste had not changed in more than a hundred years. The connection had never broken.

A circle more than a century old finally closed.

The *Girmitiya* system tried to erase us. It tried to sever roots, rename bodies, remake souls. But letters endure. Memory persists.

Journeys reclaim what was stolen.

In 1898, my great-grandfather departed as a laborer, a number, a nameless body in the hold of a ship.

In 2007, I returned as a daughter.

The inheritance was never land or wealth. It was love. It was dignity. It was the quiet, unbreakable knowledge that we belong somewhere, not because we own it, but because it owns us.

And now, I carry a mission. Not for myself. For the ones who could not speak. For the ones whose names were misspelled, whose contracts were burned, whose graves have no stones.

I carry this story into the winds of the world.

Let every ear hear.

Let every heart know:

Silence can be broken.

And the dignity of those who came before us

still lives.

still walks.

still tastes like puffed rice and brown sugar.

still finds its way home.

Family Voices and Unspoken Struggles

My brother Ramnarace and I were the first in the family to complete high school and then university, a path few others pursued. My younger sister in London became a registered nurse, while others found success in business and trade. Each accomplishment carried its own dignity, each thread adding to the tapestry of our family's journey.

It is important to name those whose devotion carried this story forward. My sister Sita, once Dwarika and now Abdool, was entrusted with the letters by my grandmother when she left Trinidad for London, hoping someone in England might translate them. She found no one. In 1977, she sent them to me in New York. .

My elder brother Ramnarace (*Narace)*, spent countless hours with Ramawad in the fields and markets, absorbing oral histories that remain unmatched. My sister, Mattie in Florida has been equally active, offering anecdotes and recollections that enrich our understanding. I am told she bears a striking resemblance to Sughari, while our elder sister Chanerdaye was especially cherished by our great grandfather, who saw in her the likeness of the sister he had left behind in India.

My relationship with my elder brother has been both steady and instructive. As a child, I often turned to him for guidance. He was my mentor, the one who borrowed books from the San Fernando library and kept them under his pillow; books I secretly read and returned without his knowledge. He helped me through school difficulties and personal challenges. , I began to question him, engaging with what I perceived as limitations or inconsistencies. It was the natural journey of a younger sibling seeking independence, much as children wrestle with their parents. Admiration and disagreement lived side by side, shaping the depth of our bond.

These moments remind me that memory is not only about ancestors long gone, but also about the living voices of brothers and sisters, each carrying fragments of the story. To honor this journey fully, their names and contributions must be spoken, for it is through them that the family's spirit continues to echo across generations.

The Idea Behind This Book

Years later, living on different continents and meeting only occasionally in person, I remained unaware of the unique talent of my husband's younger brother, Adeel. My father-in-law, Dr. Ajaz Rahi, visited New York on several occasions, and we spoke at length about his writings and his passion for life. I listened to his poetry, though my limited Urdu sometimes kept me from fully grasping the finesse of his vocabulary. What I did not realize then was how deeply his poetic spirit flowed in the veins of his son, Adeel.

Only a few months ago, a handful of sentences shared with Adeel revealed a jewel, brilliantly crafted and shimmering with reverence, as he retold parts of my mother's story. I was in awe. The sacredness of his recounting felt like a prayer offering. When I read his article *The Nightingale of Gandhi Village*, I was moved beyond words. A new relationship was born, and with it, a cherished communication.

Together, we soon realized that this journey was not his alone, nor mine in isolation. Adeel Ajaz's article about my mother inspired me deeply with its elegance and sensitivity, awakening in me the desire to document the life of another elder in our family. As our conversations grew, his generosity extended into an invitation to collaborate, not merely as writer and contributor, but as co-authors. While I hold his style in the highest regard, I consider it a distinct honor to undertake this project side by side, weaving our voices into one narrative of remembrance.

With growing confidence, I shared the only surviving photograph of my grandfather, Ramawad Ramadhin, an image taken from his identification card. I asked Adeel if he might spend time with this face, the earliest visual memory preserved in our family. From that seed, a few days later, an extraordinary title emerged: *From Ramnagar to Gandhi Village*, a labor of love, reverence, and continuity.

I wish to extend my deepest thanks to Adeel, whose words have become bridges across generations, and to Dr. Ajaz Rahi, whose poetry planted the seeds of this legacy. To my family, who carried memory as devotion, and to all who have listened, encouraged, and shared in this journey, your presence has been the quiet strength behind every page. This book is as much yours as it is mine.

Acknowledgement

When I reflect upon the journey that has brought this book from whispered family memories to printed pages, I am reminded that no story is ever the work of a single pair of hands. This narrative, woven from the threads of Ramnagar and Gandhi Village, has been shaped by countless souls who believed that the fragrance of our ancestors' soil deserved to be carried forward, not as a burden, but as a blessing.

My deepest gratitude begins with my husband, Shakeel Ajaz, and my two daughters, Sita Dwarika Dutta and Shandana Dwarika Ajaz. They support every step I take, especially at this stage of my life. No endeavor feels complete without their involvement. My husband's patient encouragement, along with my daughters' unwavering and passionate support, has made possible not only this work, but all of my community efforts. They have been my anchor when the seas of research grew rough, and my sail when the winds of purpose challenged.

I am also grateful to my colleagues Dr. Dhanpaul Narine and Dr. Vishnu Bisram. In particular, it was Dr. Dhanpaul's reaction to the article *The Nightingale of Gandhi Village* that provided the essential prompt to consider expanding these stories into a full-length book. Their early encouragement helped transform a collection of recollections into a clear vision for this project.

A special thank you to Adeel Ajaz, my brother-in-law and now my companion in this sacred labor of remembrance. When I first read his words about my mother I knew that a kindred spirit had found me. His pen has given wings to stories that might otherwise have remained confined to aging photographs and fragile letters. His reverence for our heritage, poetic sensibility, and tireless dedication have transformed this manuscript into something far greater than either of us could have accomplished alone.

To my extended family across continents, my siblings, my nieces and nephews, and the countless cousins who shared their fragments of memory, this book belongs to you as much as to anyone.

And finally, to Ramadhin Ramsahai and Sughari, my great grandparents, who crossed the seven oceans with nothing but a pouch of soil and an unbreakable will: this book is my prayer at your feet. You asked for nothing but the dignity of labor and the right to remember. I hope these pages honor the silence you endured and the songs you never stopped singing.

May the fragrance of Ramnagar's soil, carried in a small bundle across seven seas, continue to bloom in Gandhi Village and wherever our descendants walk.

My Message to Future Generations

I did not set out to change the world. I set out to find my family. Yet in that search, I discovered something larger, a path that others may walk, proof that memory and belonging endure across oceans.

The two lines my grandfather repeated, *"Praan jayee par vachan na jayee,"* were not mere childhood recitations. They became the guiding philosophy of my life. The promise I made to my ancestors, to uncover their story, to give voice to their silence, and to restore their dignity, was a vow I carried to its end, no matter the cost.

A century-old silence can indeed be broken. Scattered fragments can be gathered into a whole. One woman's devotion to her ancestors, joined with a scholar's rigor, an educator's dedication, and a community leader's vision, can become a gift for generations yet unborn.

The letters I refused to leave unread, the village I refused to forget, the connections I refused to let die, these were not private acts. They were declarations that every story deserves to be told, and that no journey, however coerced, can erase the dignity of those who undertook it.

Today, the home I built in Ramnagar stands as a quiet monument, not to wealth or power, but to devotion.

Bhagwatie Bhanu Dwarika
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The Foreword - *A Bird's Eye View*

Across the Seven Seas: Memory, Migration and the Making of a People

History does not always forget. Sometimes, it simply falls silent. Between the official archives of an empire and the inherited memory of nations lies a vast, unspoken story; the lives of those who crossed oceans not as explorers or conquerors, but as the displaced, the deceived, and the determined. This book rises from that silence. It tells of the Indian indentured laborers the Girmitiyas who, between 1845 and 1917, left their ancestral lands and braved the dreaded seven seas to the Caribbean. Their story is not etched in monuments, but in scars, in songs, and in survival.

The very word Girmitiya carries its own distortion, born from the mispronunciation of "agreement." Within that distortion lies a deeper truth: the contracts they signed were rarely understood, often manipulated, and ultimately enforced within a system that bore an unsettling resemblance to slavery. This narrative unfolds within that framework, tracing not only the machinery of indenture but also its human consequences, the emotional, cultural, and generational upheavals that followed.

At its heart is the life of Ramadhin Ramsahai, a young man from Ramnagar near Allahabad, whose journey in 1898 became both personal and symbolic. His departure was not an isolated act of courage or desperation. It was part of a wider exodus shaped by famine, colonial revenue policies, and the slow erosion of rural stability in North India. Thousands like him were compelled to consider the unthinkable: leaving behind land, lineage, and identity.

The contracts they entered were not simply legal documents; they were instruments of control. Bound by agreements they scarcely understood, laborers stepped into a regime that dictated movement, wages, even personal relationships. Consent was an illusion, opportunity a mirage, and exploitation of reality.

Yet even within this system, humanity endured. Farewell rituals, Bhojpuri folk songs, and the quiet grief of separation became acts of resistance, preserving identity against the threat of erasure. The crossing itself was a rupture. The voyage across the seven seas was not only geographical but civilizational. For many, it meant losing caste, community, and spiritual continuity. The ocean became both barrier and crucible, dissolving and reshaping identities under the weight of uncertainty, illness, and loss.

Amid this upheaval, Ramadhin's relationship with Sughari shines as one of the most intimate threads. Their union defied the rigid caste hierarchies that had governed their lives in India. In the new world, stripped of traditional structures yet still haunted by them, love became both an act of defiance and a means of reconstruction.

Plantation life on the Tarouba Estate brought brutal realities, long hours, harsh discipline, systemic inequality. Yet it was also here that permanence began to take root. The birth of Ramawad marked more than the arrival of a child; it signaled the transformation from transient laborer to settler, from exile to belonging.

That transformation gained collective form in the evolution of a settlement once derisively called "Cooliewood" into the dignified Gandhi Village. The renaming was not merely symbolic. It was a reclaiming of identity, a rejection of imposed labels, and an assertion of cultural pride.

Memory, however, does not preserve itself. It requires guardians. Soondrie Dwarika's devotion to folk music ensured that the voices of the past continued to resonate. Through songs carried across generations, history survived not as text alone, but as living tradition.

Later, Bhagwatie Dwarika's search for ancestral roots between 1982 and 2007 bridged continents and centuries. Her journey reflected a broader longing among descendants of indentured laborers, a desire to reconnect with origins once forcibly severed.

The story continues into the present, highlighting the political, social, and economic rise of a new generation. From the margins of colonial society to positions of influence, the descendants of Girmitiyas redefined their place within the nation, transforming inherited struggle into opportunity.

The prayers and blessings that close this narrative are not mere ritual. They are acknowledgments of endurance, invocations for continuity.

This book is not a linear history, nor solely a biography. It is an intergenerational tapestry woven from archival fragments, oral traditions, and lived experience. It seeks to restore agency to those too often reduced to statistics, and to illuminate lives that unfolded beyond the gaze of official records.

In telling the story of Ramadhin Ramsahai and his descendants, it tells a larger story: the making of a people. A story of rupture and reconstruction, of loss and creation, of silence and voice. It reminds us that identity is never static; it is forged through movement, shaped by adversity, and sustained by memory.

The waters of the seven seas no longer divide worlds as they once did. Yet their echoes remain in language, in music, in names, and in the enduring spirit of those who crossed them. This book is an attempt to listen to those echoes, to trace their origins, and to honor the journeys they continue to inspire.

Hameed Qaiser
Fiction Writer and Critic
Islamabad, Pakistan

The Fragrance of Soil: An Anthropological Reflection on Migration, Memory and Identity

I am an anthropologist with a deep interest in documenting the social and cultural realities that shape youth in contemporary society. My work moves between lived experience and critical reflection, exploring themes of identity, digital cultures, and evolving social dynamics. Through my writing, I aim to make complex social questions both accessible and meaningful. I have authored several articles published in Pakistan's leading newspapers, where I offer perspectives that connect everyday experience with broader cultural and structural questions.

Migration is never only a movement from one place to another. In its deepest form, it is a history written upon the bodies of those who were forced to leave, those persuaded by illusion, and those who crossed oceans without fully understanding what awaited them.

In *From Ramnagar to Gandhi Village*, migration is not presented as a neutral transition, but as a lived experience shaped by labor, loss, endurance, and the slow reconstruction of identity under extreme conditions.

From an anthropological perspective, migration is never a complete separation from the past. Rather, it creates a layered existence in which old identities are carried forward, reshaped, and re expressed in new environments. The individual does not arrive empty. He arrives with memory systems, cultural habits, and symbolic attachments that continue to define who he is. These elements do not remain static. They evolve under new social and environmental conditions.

One of the most powerful aspects of migration is the way material symbols become carriers of identity. Soil taken from the homeland, for instance, is not merely a physical object. It is a condensed form of memory. It represents belonging, ancestry, and emotional continuity. Even when geography changes, such symbols preserve a psychological connection to origin. In this way, identity is not left behind, but transported in symbolic form, continuing to shape how individuals understand themselves in new worlds.

Migration under the *Girmit* system was not a simple exchange of labor for opportunity, but a structured form of displacement shaped by colonial power. Beneath the language of contracts lay a system in which movement was controlled, return was nearly impossible, and individuals were reduced to instruments of labor. Yet even within this structure, new forms of social belonging emerged, most notably the bonds of *jahaji bhai*, or ship brotherhood, through which shared suffering created a kinship that replaced lost social worlds.

One of the most significant dimensions of this history lies in the structural nature of suffering. The plantation system did not only exploit individuals. It reorganized human life through institutional control.

It was a system designed to strip away the individual and replace him with a unit of production. Life in plantation spaces reflected this reality through overcrowded barracks, restricted autonomy, and constant surveillance. Yet even in these conditions, human relationships adapted. Old social hierarchies weakened under the weight of shared hardship, and new collective identities began to emerge.

Cultural practices played a crucial role in this process of survival. Rituals, songs, and language became vessels of memory, allowing displaced communities to maintain continuity with their past while adapting to new environments. These practices were not preserved in their original form, but reinterpreted in response to lived conditions. Culture, therefore, did not disappear under pressure. It reorganized itself within it.

The transformation of identity became even more visible across generations. What began as the lived experience of displacement gradually turned into inherited memory. The first generation carried the direct weight of separation, while later generations inherited a reconstructed sense of belonging shaped by storytelling, ritual, and cultural adaptation. In this way, migration became not only a historical event, but an ongoing process of identity formation.

Within *From Ramnagar to Gandhi Village*, this layered experience is central. It shows that migration is not only about leaving a place, but about the long and difficult process of rebuilding life in its absence. Identity does not dissolve in that process. It is reassembled through memory, struggle, and adaptation.

The fragrance of soil thus becomes a powerful metaphor for continuity. It represents the way memory persists even when geography changes. It is not nostalgia alone, but the lived presence of origin carried into new worlds. Soil, in this sense, is not just land. It is memory, suffering, and survival compressed into symbolic form.

Ultimately, this history reveals that migration under colonial systems was not a smooth transition, but a deeply uneven human experience marked by exploitation and endurance. Yet within that suffering, new forms of life emerged. Communities rebuilt themselves, identities transformed, and memory survived in ways that could not be fully controlled.

And in that sense, the fragrance of soil never fades. It survives not because migration is easy, but because memory refuses to disappear, even in the harshest conditions of history.

The more I learn about the systemic exploitation of the Indian and African diasporas, the more I value the quiet heroism of those who refuse to let the past remain buried. Among them is my aunt, Bhagwatie Bhanu Dwarika, whose life carries the legacy of forebears who endured displacement and hardship.

From a small village in Trinidad, she made her way to New York, pursued higher education, and built a name in community development. Yet her journey is not defined by personal success alone. Even today, she remains committed to the welfare of people in Trinidad, giving back to the very communities shaped by that difficult past.

In her, I see continuity, a living reminder that history does not end with suffering, but carries forward as strength, purpose, and responsibility.

We are shaped not only by the past we inherit, but by the courage with which we choose to carry it forward.

By Mishaal Adeel Ajaz

Between Two Worlds

As a product of two cultures coming together, it can be challenging to understand where you fit in. As the child of Trinidadian and Pakistani parents, raised in the vibrant melting pot of New York in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I often found myself with a lingering question: where do I truly belong?

I imagine my ancestors were faced with the same uncertainty when they uprooted their lives to begin again in foreign lands. Their journeys carried both hope and longing, a search for place and purpose that continues to echo across generations.

As a first-generation child of immigrants, I have been fortunate to inherit freedom: the freedom to walk upon the soil my ancestors once crossed oceans to reach, the freedom to struggle and strive on my own terms, and the freedom to travel to lands they could only have imagined. Each step, both a privilege and a continuation of their unfinished journey.

That awareness deepened when I visited the memorial site commemorating indentured Indian laborers. Standing by the Hooghly River, breathing the heavy, musk-filled air as the ebb and flow of the water moved towards the open sea, I thought of my great-great-grandfather, Ramadhin. As he boarded the *RHONI*, did he fear the unknown? Could he have imagined that one day his descendants would return to touch the very soil he had left behind?

To express gratitude for this life seems miniscule in comparison to his sacrifices. Yet we honor his struggle not only by remembering, but by living fully, by succeeding in ways he and countless others would have wished for us. Their endurance is our inheritance. Our freedom is their legacy.

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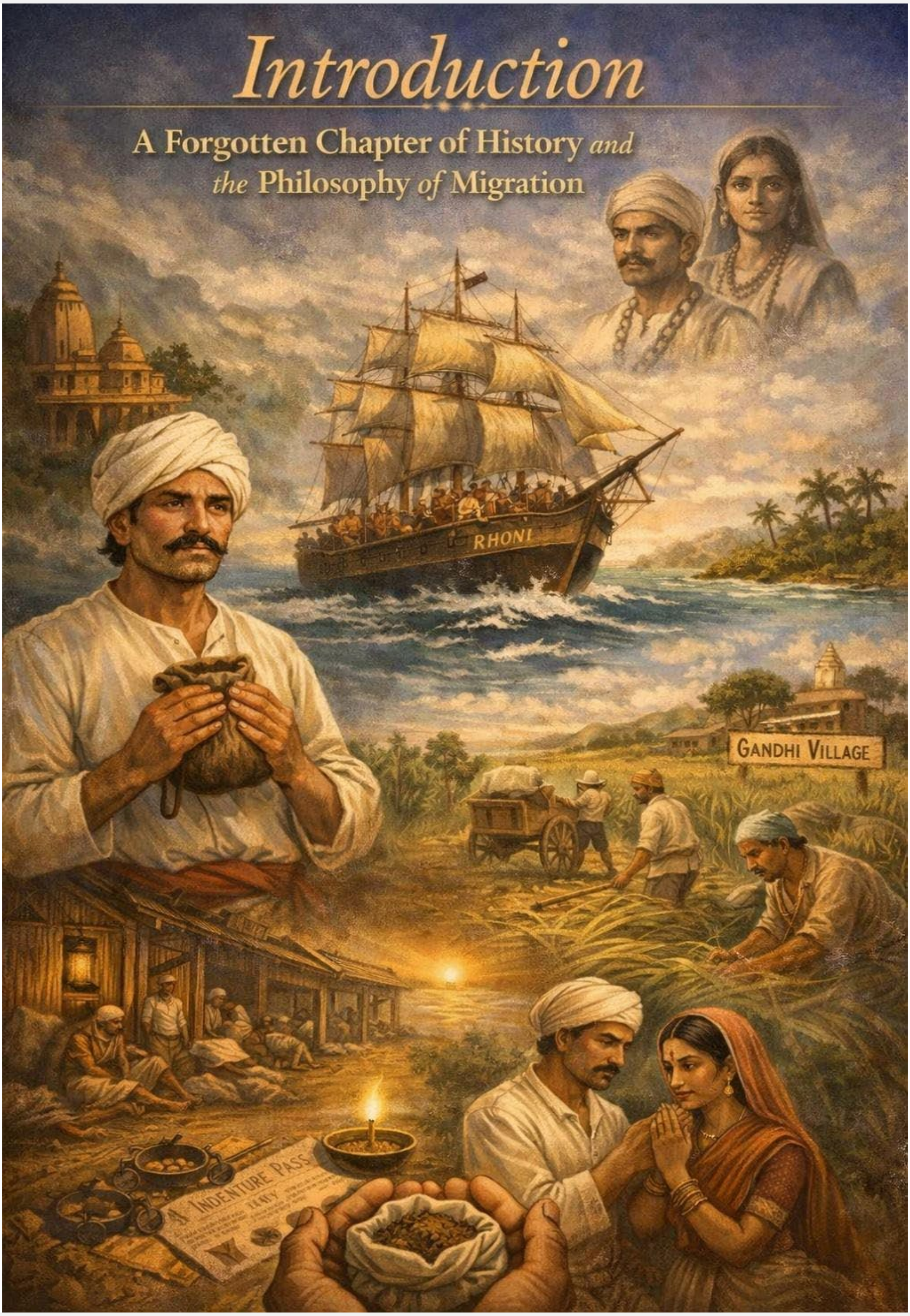

Introduction
A Forgotten Chapter of History and
the Philosophy of Migration
RHONI
GANDHI VILLAGE
INDENTURE PASS

Introduction: A Forgotten Chapter of History and the Philosophy of Migration

Human history is, in many ways, a history of migrations. Since the dawn of humanity, people have moved from one place to another in search of sustenance, safety, and the possibility of a better life. Yet migration is more than the movement of bodies. It is the uprooting of lives, the crossing of worlds, and the making of new identities. Great civilizations have arisen from migration, but some journeys have been deliberately ignored or quietly forgotten. Among these neglected chapters is the story of indentured labour, the *Girmitiya* system, which in the nineteenth century forced millions of Indians to cross the *Kala Pani* and sail across the seven seas.

The Philosophy of Migration: Between Survival and Separation

At its core, migration holds hope and fear in uneasy balance. A person leaves behind home, ancestral graves, and the fragrance of familiar earth only when survival itself is at stake. For many farmers of the subcontinent under colonial rule, migration was not an adventure, but a necessity born of debt, uncertainty, and rural decline. Colonial economic policies had left villages strained and peasants burdened. When recruiters, known as *arkatis*, painted dreams of distant islands where fields yielded wealth, villagers concealed the pain of uprooting within the hope of a brighter future.

Psychologically, a migrant never fully escapes the past. Wherever he goes, he carries his God, his language, and his traditions with him. The story of Ramadhin Ramsahai reflects that condition. Though he left Ramnagar near Allahabad, he did not leave it behind within himself.

A Forgotten Chapter: The Indentured System

When the British Empire abolished slavery in 1834, sugar plantations still demanded cheap labour. To fill that void, the indentured system was created, a modern, legal form of bondage. Workers were sent for five years to unfamiliar islands that they didn’t know existed. n Between 1845 and 1917, nearly 1.5 million Indians were transported to several countries under this system including to Mauritius, Fiji, Guyana, Jamaica, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago.

Historians have filled volumes with wars, kings, and political upheavals, yet the stories of these *Girmitiya* laborers often remain in the margins. These men and women helped build the economies of distant lands with the marrow of their bones, yet their names are scarcely remembered. This chapter seeks to recover part of that forgotten history and to remind the reader that the flourishing cultures across the *Kala Pani* are rooted in their labour, suffering, and endurance.

Behind this vast machinery of migration stood one powerful name: John Gladstone, a British plantation owner in Guyana and father of future Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone. When slavery was abolished in 1834, Gladstone faced a crisis. His sugar estates were starving for labour. He petitioned the British Parliament, arguing that indentured labour from India could fill the void. In 1838, the first experimental shipment of Indian laborers arrived in British Guiana. Though early abuses led to a temporary suspension, Gladstone’s relentless lobbying and the sugar lobby’s financial pressure eventually pushed Parliament to formalize the system. The Indian Emigration Act of 1842 opened the floodgates. By 1845, the first ship, *Fatel Razack*, was bound for Trinidad. What began as one planter’s solution became the legalized suffering of 1.5 million Indians. John Gladstone’s name may be absent from Trinidad’s monuments, but his fingerprints remain all over the *Girmitiya* contract.

The Pouch of Soil: A Symbol of Identity

In the philosophy of migration, soil holds sacred meaning. When Ramadhin Ramsahai left Ramnagar, he carried a pouch of courtyard earth. In doing so, he preserved a part of himself. That soil became an anchor, something steady against the violence of distance and uncertainty. For migrant communities, cultural survival is a sacred struggle. They protect their Bhojpuri language, hold fast to folk songs such as *birha, chowtal,* and *sohar*, and keep their faith alive even in the barracks.

Indians in Trinidad proved that though they were physically distant from India, they were not spiritually severed from it. Through labour, ritual, language, and memory, they transformed a foreign island into a kind of "Little India." This introduction helps us grasp the pain and determination that began on the deck of the *RHONI* in 1898 and continued into the making of Gandhi Village.

Purpose and Scope of the Essay

The aim of this work is not only to recount one family's history, but to pay tribute to the millions of souls lost in the dust of empire. It seeks to understand how a laborer became a victor through strength, music, and faith. The journey *From Ramnagar to Gandhi Village* is, in truth, the triumph of human will over systems of oppression and over the vast indifference of the sea.

This chapter serves as a prelude to the larger saga, drawing the reader into a mental and emotional landscape where the scent of cane fields, the suffocation of ships, and the echoes of Allahabad's fairs converge. Without understanding this philosophy of migration, we cannot fully grasp the weight of Ramadhin Ramsahai's decision, a choice that, a century later, would reunite two worlds across the seas.

Comparative Philosophy: The *Girmitiya* and the Modern Migrant

People have always moved, but the reasons for leaving, and the conditions under which they leave, shape the meaning of the journey. There is a world of difference between a man stepping onto a creaking ship in 1898 and someone scanning a boarding pass at an airport in 2026. To compare the *Girmitiya*, the indentured laborer, with the modern migrant is not simply to compare two historical situations. It is to ask how departure reshapes the human heart.

For the *Girmitiya*, departure was closer to a funeral than an adventure. Crossing the *Kala Pani* meant more than leaving a village. It meant losing caste, community, and, in many cases, social identity itself. They left as farmers or artisans and arrived as “coolies,” reduced to numbers. Some carried a handful of soil from home, a fragile link to a land they feared they might never touch again.

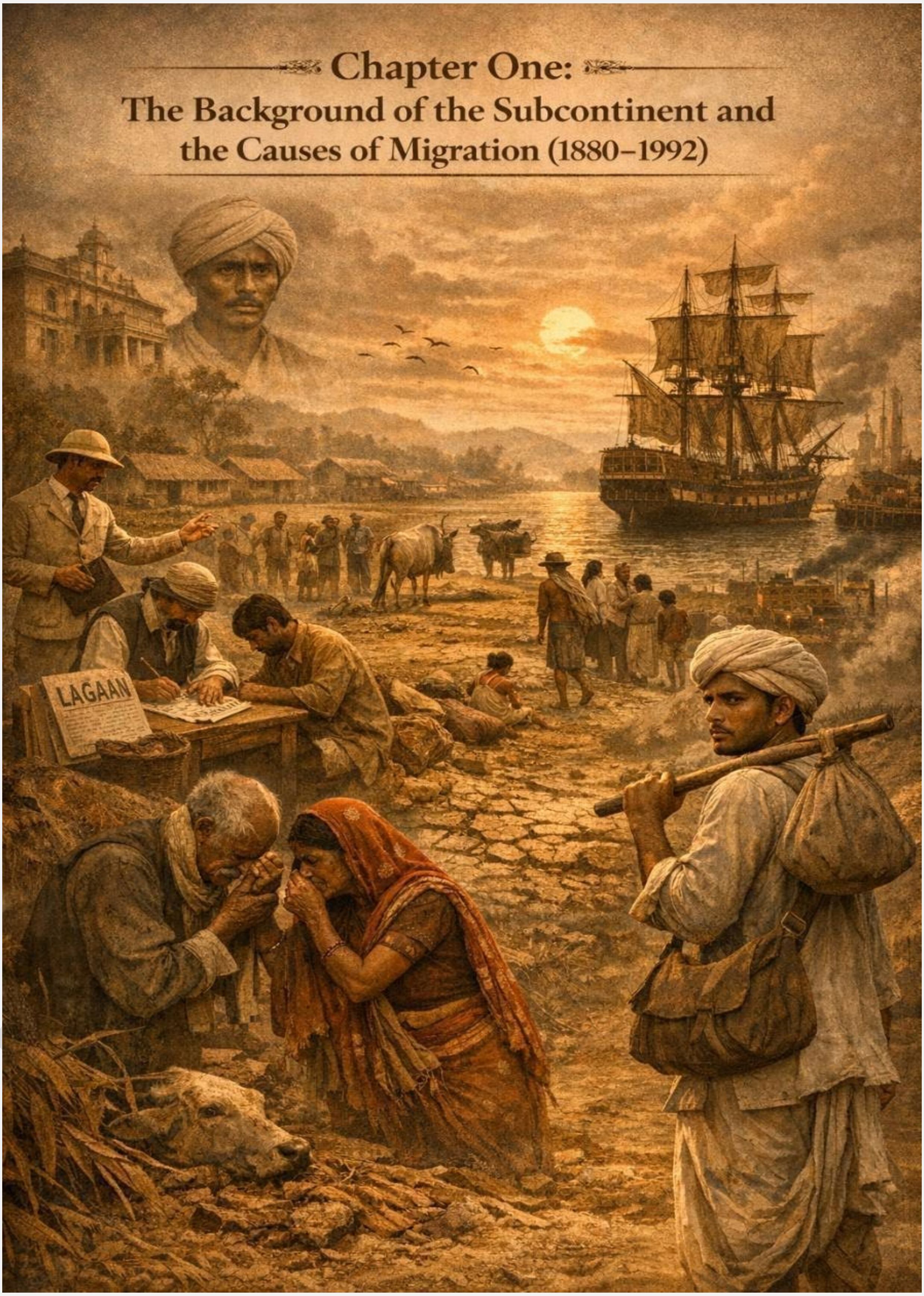
Today’s migrant travels with a phone full of contacts and cloud storage. One lands in Toronto or London and immediately looks for signal and connection. Soil is rarely carried because return feels possible. That belief softens the pain of departure, but it also creates a different kind of restlessness.

The *Girmitiya* lived under “The Agreement,” a contract that locked them into years of brutal labor. Their struggle was for survival against hunger, lash, and law. The modern migrant, whether nurse, engineer, or student, often moves under the banner of choice. Yet the pressures remain: poverty, broken systems, and the lure of wealthier nations. The chains have changed. Today they may appear as visas tied to employers, remittances that never cease, and the quiet ache of being an outsider. The *Girmitiya’s* wound was visible on the skin; the modern migrant’s wound often hides within loneliness.

Memory works differently too. The *Girmitiya* had no way to call home, so they rebuilt India wherever they landed. They stitched together dialects, cooked familiar food, and created new languages such as Caribbean Hindustani. Culture survived because it had to be lived. Today, one may stream films, video call parents, and inhabit two worlds at once, physically here, emotionally there. That tether preserves connection, but it can also prevent full arrival.

In the end, both journeys carry the same question: What did I give up for this? The *Girmitiya* gave up status, security, and often freedom so that their children might live. The modern migrant gives up presence, birthdays, funerals, the rhythm of seasons, the texture of home, in exchange for opportunity, stability, or a stronger passport. The ships are steel now. The contracts are digital. Yet the salt in the air remains unchanged. Human beings are still crossing water, still hoping the life they find will justify the home they left behind.

From Ramnaggr to Gandhi Village


Chapter One:
The Background of the Subcontinent and the Causes of Migration (1880–1992)
LAGAAN

Chapter One: The Background of the Subcontinent and the Causes of Migration

The closing years of the nineteenth century marked a dark chapter in the history of the Indian subcontinent, when British imperial power stood at its height and the rural economy was under severe strain. Peaceful and fertile villages like Ramnagar near Allahabad lost their vitality under colonial economic policies. India's traditional agrarian structure had weakened, and the burden of land tax, *lagaan*, grew so heavy that even ancestral lands began to slip from farmers' hands.

Economic Oppression and the Shadow of Famine

Across northern India, recurring droughts and crop failures deepened rural hardship. The priorities of the British Raj were not the welfare of local farmers, but the enrichment of the Crown's treasury. Even when rains failed and fields withered, tax collection continued with little relief. In villages like Ramnagar, the Yadav and Ahir communities, long associated with farming and cattle rearing, fell into profound economic distress. For a young man watching his elders starve and his land grow barren, survival became the central struggle.

British Recruiters: Merchants of False Dreams

In these conditions, the British devised a scheme that appeared to offer salvation but was, in fact, a trap. Recruiters, known as *arkatis*, roamed villages telling simple peasants tales of distant islands where work was light and wages were high. They painted Trinidad as a land where silver grew in the cane fields, promising that five years of labor would bring enough wealth to transform an entire family's future.

To young men like Ramadhin Ramsahai, such agents appeared almost as saviors. They concealed the truth that Trinidad lay thousands of miles away across the ocean and that return was difficult, uncertain, and often impossible. Their targets were strong, able-bodied youths accustomed to hard labor, and Ramadhin, with his extraordinary physical strength, was an ideal candidate.

Social Structure and Crisis of Identity

The Yadav community carried a proud social history, but poverty had dimmed its dignity. Ramadhin's decision to leave was driven not only by hunger, but by the desire to restore his family's lost honor. Yet in the social order of the time, crossing the seas was considered a religious sin, *Kala Pani*, punishable by expulsion from caste and community. Hunger, however, cut deeper than fear of taboo.

When Ramadhin bid farewell to his aged parents and the earth of his village, it was more than one man's departure. It was an act of rupture with a tradition that had left him bound to poverty. He did not know that the streets of Allahabad and the fields of Ramnagar he saw for the last time would thereafter live mainly in memory.

The Decision to Migrate

In early 1898, as the heat rose and crops failed, Ramadhin packed his meager belongings. His mind held one thought: *Five years of labor, then a prosperous return.* He did not realize that he was stepping into the vast machinery of the British Empire, the indentured labour system that had taken shape as a substitute for slavery after abolition.

The road from Ramnagar to the port of Calcutta was not merely a route of travel. It was a passage from one world to another. As he crossed the village boundary, the tears of his father and the prayers of his mother echoed in his ears. Thus began the saga that would later become a luminous chapter in Trinidad's history. Ramadhin Ramsahai was no longer only a farmer. He had become a *Girmitiya*, a migrant whose destiny would now be shaped by the ocean's waves and the clauses of a colonial contract.

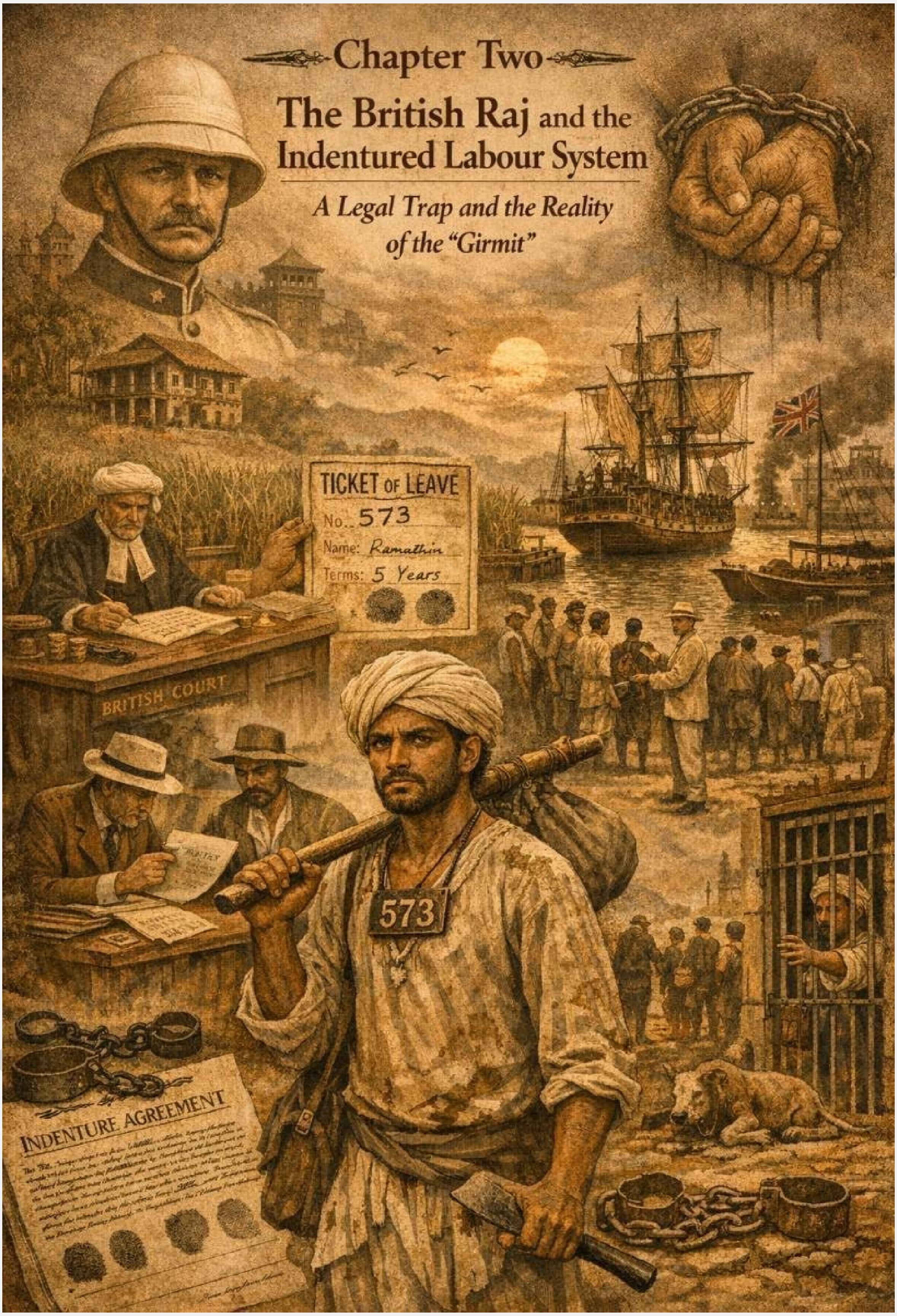
***Kala Pani* as Religious Sin**

The idea of *Kala Pani*, the “Black Water,” was more than fear of the sea’s depth. For many Hindus in the nineteenth century, crossing the ocean carried the weight of spiritual catastrophe. It was not regarded merely as a long journey, but as an act that could sever one from caste, ritual purity, and ancestral order. In the worldview of that time, the sacred geography of home stood in contrast to the unknown and ritually uncertain world beyond the horizon. Texts such as the *Baudhayana Dharmasutra* have often been cited in later discussions of this belief, especially in relation to sea voyage and the loss of caste. Whether or not every migrant understood these ideas in scriptural terms, the fear they generated was real.

Much of that dread centered on the maintenance of *varna* and ritual purity. In the village, one knew who touched one’s food, who shared one’s space, and where one stood in the social order. But on the cramped, filthy decks of an indenture ship such as the *Fatel Razack*, those distinctions could not be maintained. Eating beside strangers of unknown caste, sharing utensils, sleeping in close quarters, all of it threatened the boundaries by which ritual life had long been governed.

There was also the burden of *pitri rin*, the debt owed to one’s ancestors. A core part of many Hindu traditions is the performance of *shraddha*, the offering of food and water to those who have gone before. For many, these rites were imagined as inseparable from Indian soil and sacred waters such as the Ganges. To cross the salt sea was therefore to risk abandoning the dead, leaving them unfed in the afterlife, and leaving oneself beyond the hearing of the gods.

The fear did not end with departure. For the few who managed to return, reintegration was often painful. Some were treated as polluted, denied entry into their own family homes, and required to undergo *prayashchitta*, acts of purification meant to wash away the stain of the sea. Yet history also offers a strange irony. Those who feared they had lost their spiritual world by crossing the water spent the next century rebuilding it in places like Trinidad and Fiji. In that sense, the “black water” did not extinguish their culture. It carried it.


Chapter Two
The British Raj and the Indentured Labour System
A Legal Trap and the Reality of the "Girmit"
TICKET OF LEAVE
No. 573
Name: Ramathin
Terms: 5 Years
BRITISH COURT
573
INDENTURE AGREEMENT

Chapter Two: The British Raj and the Indentured Labour System

A Legal Trap and the Reality of the *Girmit*

When the British Empire formally abolished the inhumane system of slavery in 1834, it appeared to be a humanitarian step. Yet behind that gesture lay economic interests that soon took a new form. In colonies such as Trinidad, Guyana, and Mauritius, sugar cultivation remained central to Britain's imperial economy. With African slaves freed, the estates urgently needed cheap, bound labor. To meet that demand, the colonial government devised a legal framework known as the Indentured Labour System. Locally, Indians transformed the word "agreement" into *Girmit*, and thus began the history of the *Girmitiya* generation.

Legal Framework: Contract or Chains?

The system presented itself as a voluntary contract, but its clauses were harsh enough to turn a free person into a prisoner. Under the agreement, a laborer pledged five years of work to the colonial state. During that period, the worker's condition was perilously close to that of a substitute slave. On paper, wages, housing, and medical care were promised. In practice, the conditions attached to these promises were severe.

For example, if a laborer missed work because of illness, he could be punished for "vagrancy." In Trinidad, colonial ordinances increasingly regulated the movement of indentured workers and restricted their freedom beyond the estate. A laborer could be treated not as a citizen, but as a body under surveillance, always one step away from punishment.

Recruitment and Legal Deception

The darkest aspect of the system lay in recruitment at ports such as Calcutta and Madras. British agents were legally bound to inform migrants of their rights and destination. In practice, deception prevailed. Young men like Ramadhin Ramsahai were never told plainly that they were crossing the *Kala Pani* to islands from which return depended less on law than on British convenience and mercy.

Illiterate villagers were made to press thumbprints onto legal documents, marks that often became life sentences disguised as consent. Before British magistrates, these migrants were counted like machine parts. Their identity was no longer carried in their names, but in immigration numbers. Ramadhin Ramsahai, too, became part of this machinery, his humanity obscured beneath the language of contract.

Economic Exploitation and Penal Sections

The success of the *Girmit* system depended on penal clauses that gave planters enormous power. Laws were structured in such a way that workers remained perpetually vulnerable to debt and punishment. A small delay in cane cutting or minor damage to tools could result in deductions from wages. By the end of five years, many workers had little or nothing saved to pay for return passage or to support their families.

Ramadhin Ramsahai quickly understood that this was not ordinary labor, but a legal trap. Yet the pride and resilience of the Yadav lineage kept him inwardly strong. He learned to preserve his identity within the chains of the system. Though on paper he was a “laborer,” his spirit still carried the fragrance of Ramnagar’s open fields.

Global Context and Political Silence

In the politics of the time, Britain’s imperial dominance silenced much opposition to the system. Only later would figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Gopal Krishna Gokhale denounce indenture as a “stain on humanity” and call for its abolition. But in the late nineteenth century, the system remained firmly in place. Britain justified it as a "civilized necessity," while in truth it was an economic edifice built on the blood and sweat of millions of Indians.

Resistance Amid Chains

Millions like Ramadhin Ramsahai were ground in this system's mill. Yet their greatness lay in refusing to let legal oppression define them entirely. In the barracks, they kept alive their worship, their songs, and their culture. This chapter is not only legal history. It is also the story of silent resistance, carried out in cane fields, barracks, and colonial courts. Ramadhin Ramsahai did not allow *Girmit* to become the end of his life. He turned it into the first milestone in the making of a new India across the seas.

A New Identity Born in Chains

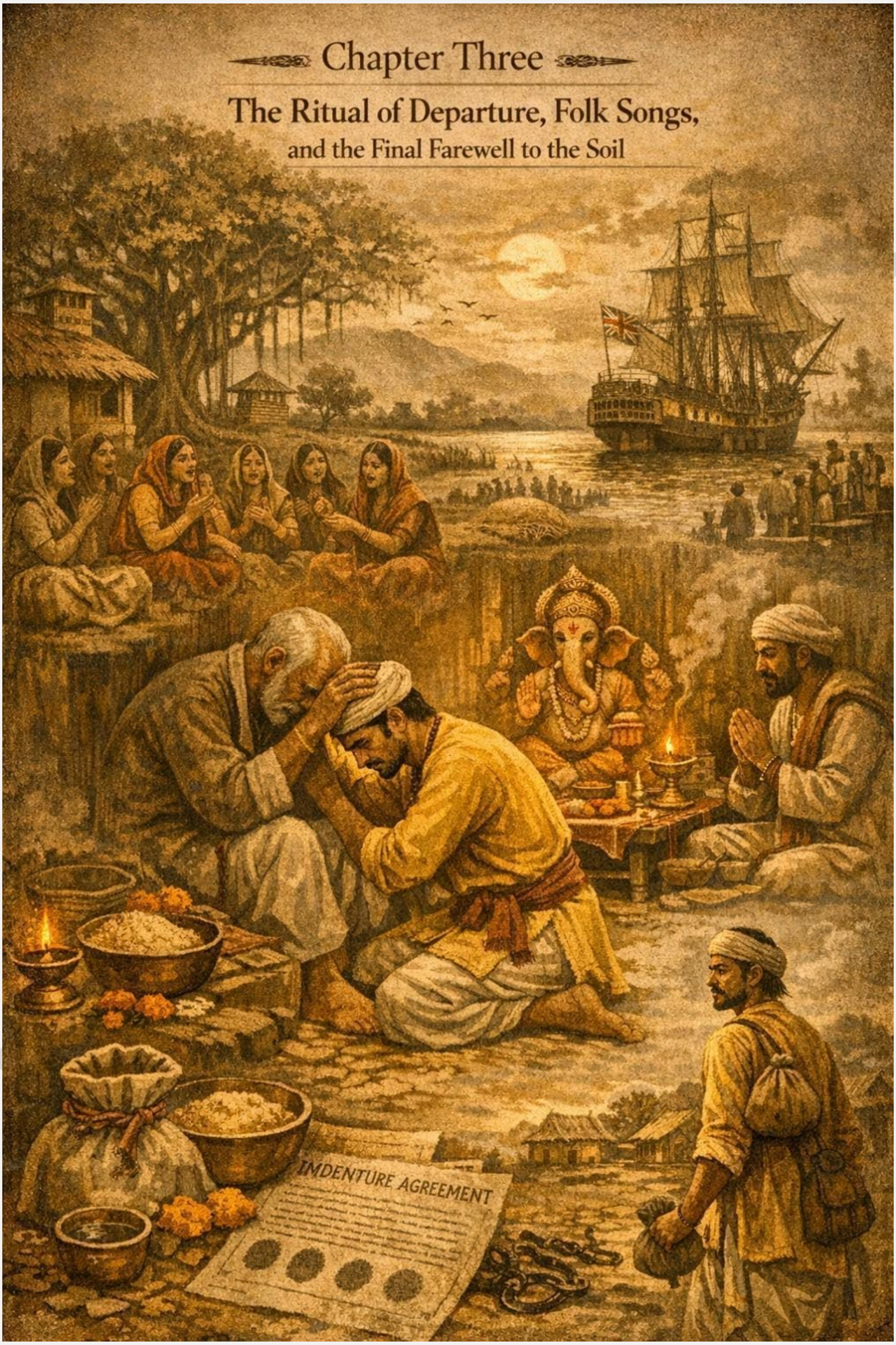
The British officials who designed the Indentured Labour System believed they had built a perfect machine: a closed loop of debt, strict laws, and physical confinement meant to turn a human being into a replaceable unit of production. By stripping a man of his name, assigning him a serial number, and exchanging his home for a cramped barrack, the Raj attempted a systematic erasure of identity.

Yet as the nineteenth century drew to a close, the colonial state's miscalculation began to show. It had measured the cost of transport, labor, and profit, but it had failed to reckon with what each migrant carried inwardly. In the *gathri*, the small cloth bundle clutched to the chest, there were no riches, only the seeds of a civilization. One person carried a worn copy of the *Ramayana*, another a prayer mat, another a handful of ancestral soil.

More importantly, the system could not prevent the formation of a new kind of family. While the law recognized no social bonds among the laborers, the migrants themselves forged the bond of *Jahaji Bhai*, ship brotherhood. Born in the shared trauma of the *Kala Pani*, that connection often grew stronger than blood. It was one of the first cracks in the colonial trap: the realization that though they had lost the world they knew, they had found one another.

The British government could enforce a ticket system to keep a man within estate boundaries, but it could find no law strong enough to imprison his soul. As the sun set over the Caroni plains, the sound of the *dholak* and the familiar cadence of Bhojpuri verses drifted across the fields. It was a quiet rebellion of memory and rhythm, a sign that the *Girmitiyas* had not arrived only to labor. They had arrived to endure, to remember, and, in time, to stay.

The legal trap had moved the body, but it had failed to capture the heart. Ramadhin Ramsahai, like thousands of others, was no longer only a subject of the British Raj. He had become the keeper of a memory already beginning to transform a landscape of chains into a place that could one day be called home.


Chapter Three
The Ritual of Departure, Folk Songs,
and the Final Farewell to the Soil
IMDENTURE AGREEMENT

Chapter Three: The Ritual of Departure, Folk Songs and the Final Farewell to the Soil

On a misty morning in 1898, the dawn that broke over Ramnagar was not simply the beginning of a new day for the Yadav family. It was the end of an era and the threshold of an uncertain future. Ramadhin Ramsahai, now registered as a *Girmitiya*, stood in the courtyard of his ancestral home, where his childhood had unfolded. In Indian village life, a home is not only four walls. It is a sacred bond tied to the spirits of ancestors, household deities, and the fragrance of the earth. To sever that bond was no small wound, and to endure it required the solace of religion and tradition.

Farewell Rituals: A Fusion of Devotion and Fear

According to Hindu tradition, when one embarks on a long and perilous journey, *Ganesh Puja* and *Satyanarayan Katha* are performed to remove obstacles. In a corner of Ramadhin's mud house, where a *tulsi* plant stood upon a small platform, elders and the local priest arranged a special ritual. Ramadhin wore a yellow *dhoti*, and the sandalwood *tilak* on his forehead marked his vow never to forget where he came from.

As the priest recited Sanskrit mantras, their echoes carried a strange sorrow. When the *raksha sutra*, the protective thread, was tied around Ramadhin's wrist, his mother's hands trembled. That thread was more than a string. It held the weight of countless prayers for her son's safety. At the end of the ritual, Ramadhin touched the threshold of his home to his forehead, then filled a small pouch with soil to carry across the *Kala Pani*. That earth was his only tangible proof of belonging, a reminder of who he was and where he had begun.

Folk Songs: The Poetry of Separation

In Indian villages, emotion is often expressed more through song than through speech. As Ramadhin's departure drew near, the women of the village, including his sisters and aunts, sat in a circle and sang the traditional songs of *babul* and *pardes*. In Uttar Pradesh, *sohar* and *biraha* songs carry a sorrow that pierces the heart.

These songs summoned the Himalayas, the waters of the Ganga, and mango orchards, all calling Ramadhin back. This treasury of folk music was part of what migrants carried inwardly. Later, in Trinidad's cane fields, such songs would evolve into a new *biraha* and chutney music.

The Last Dialogue with Soil

At the final moment of departure, when Ramadhin touched his father's feet, silence filled the house. In the Yadav community, men were not expected to weep, yet Ramadhin's eyes brimmed with tears. He knew that crossing the *Kala Pani* meant being branded impure in the eyes of his caste, for religious belief held that sea travel violated *dharma*. But poverty's chains were stronger than fear of social exile.

As he crossed the village boundary and looked back one last time at Ramnagar, he felt that a part of himself remained there. The pouch containing *sattu*, a little Ganga water, and soil was now his only comfort. These were not mere provisions or relics. They were fragments of identity. Ahead lay the ocean, unknown people, and a land whose language he did not know. Yet within him echoed the mantras and songs that gave him courage: *"Wherever you go, your soil will remain with you."*

Social Impact of Departure

Ramadhin's migration was not only the departure of one man. It reshaped the emotional life of the entire household. His family began counting the days until his return. As later letters suggest, his father sat daily in the village square, waiting for some traveler who might bring news of his son. This sorrow of migration became the fate of countless Indian families of that era.

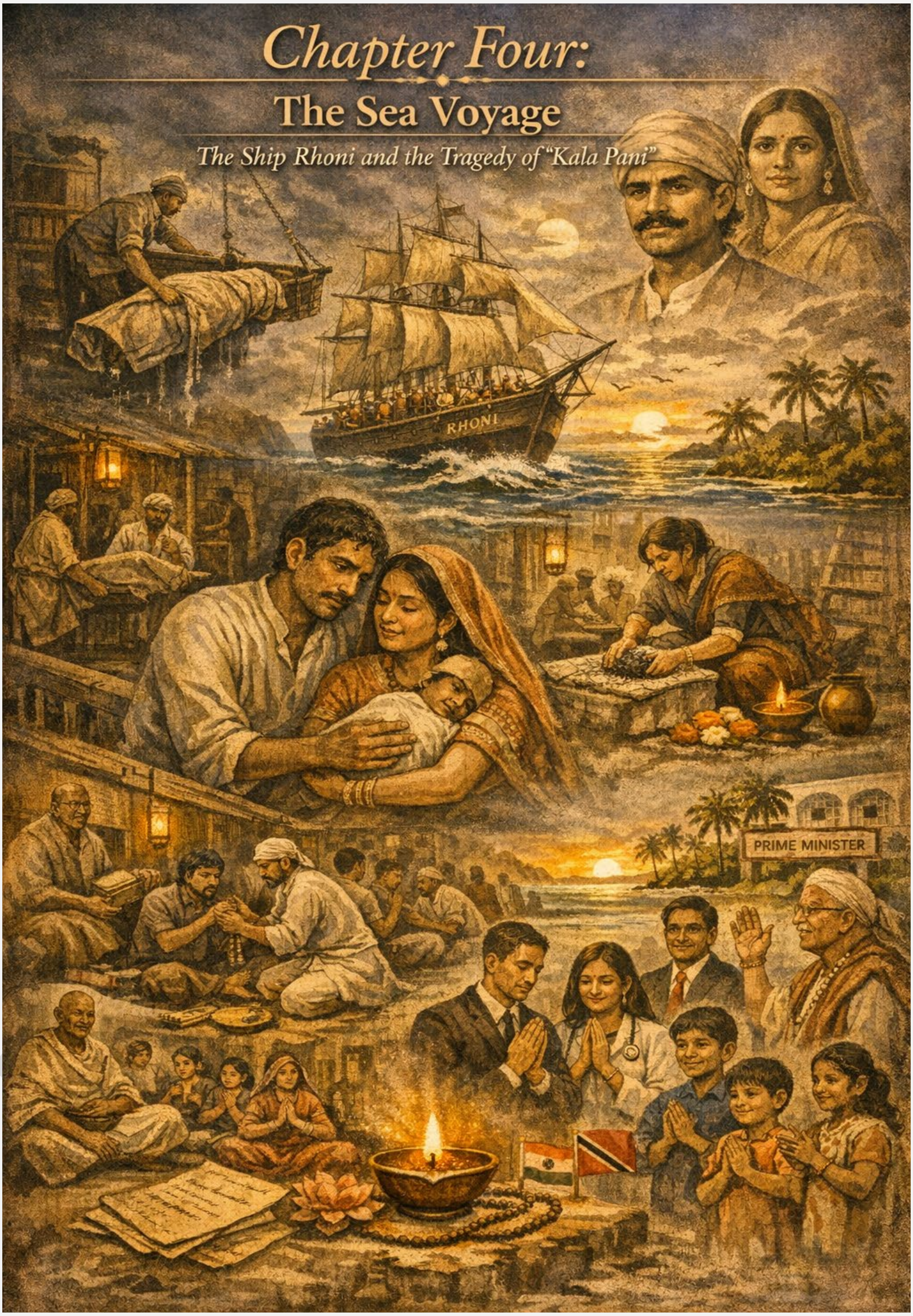
The *Girmitiyas* who reached Trinidad were not laborers alone. They carried with them rituals, songs, and inherited ways of seeing the world. Ramadhin Ramsahai's departure from Ramnagar became the beginning of another chapter, one that would eventually take root on the island of Trinidad. The soil he carried in his pouch would, in the imagination of later generations, become part of the foundation of Gandhi Village. His separation was not temporary. It altered the course of his life and helped give rise to a generation that kept alive the memory of Ramnagar across the seas.

A Silent Contract of Memory

As the dust of Ramnagar settled behind him, Ramadhin may well have felt that his true contract was not the one he had signed with the British, but the unspoken covenant he carried with his own earth. Every step toward the port was a step into a silence that might last for decades. In an age before telegrams or telephones had reached the rural heartlands, departure was like falling into a void from which no immediate word could return.

He was not carrying a pouch of earth alone. He was carrying the burden of remembrance.

This silent contract of memory endured as long as he breathed. So long as he remembered the rhythm of the songs, the taste of the water, and the dust of his village paths, Ramnagar would continue to live within him. In that sense, he became a living archive, traveling to the far side of the world so that the story of Ramnagar would not end at the village boundary, but begin again across the sea.


Chapter Four:
The Sea Voyage
The Ship Rhoni and the Tragedy of "Kala Pani"
RHONI
PRIME MINISTER

Chapter Four: The Sea Voyage

The Ship *RHONI* and the Tragedy of *Kala Pani*

In 1898, when the sailing ship *RHONI* lifted anchor from Calcutta's Hooghly port, the hundreds of Indians aboard did not experience it as the beginning of a journey alone. For many, it felt like stepping into the jaws of living death. In the culture of the subcontinent, crossing the seas was called *Kala Pani*, a transgression so grave that it could mean expulsion from one's community. Yet the pain of poverty and hunger had already pushed many beyond the protection of taboo. Ramadhin Ramsahai, tall and strong, stood out among the crowd. As he entered the cramped darkness of steerage, he understood for the first time how vast the distance was between "freedom" and "contract."

Inside the Ship: The Humiliation of Humanity

Ships like the *RHONI* were built for cargo, yet under indenture they became vessels of human freight. In the lower decks, where sunlight scarcely reached and air barely moved, men, women, and children were packed together like cattle. Each passenger had only a few feet of space in which to sleep, wake, and eat. When the sea turned violent, bodies slammed against wooden planks, and the cries of children rose into a terror beyond language.

There was almost no trace of hygiene. Stench, dampness, and suffocation turned the ship into a breeding ground for disease. Ramadhin, who had known the open fields of Ramnagar, felt himself choking in this moving prison. Yet his inner strength kept him from collapse. As others began to lose hope, he slowly emerged as a source of support.

Epidemics and Burials Without Graves

By the second month, as the ship crossed the Indian Ocean, cholera and dysentery ravaged the passengers. Contaminated water and poor food destroyed what little strength they had left. Each morning, the crew inspected the steerage and removed the bodies of those who had died during the night.

Mothers who had brought their children with dreams of a better future now held them lifeless in their arms. In Indian tradition, *antyesti*, the last rites, are sacred, requiring water, fire, and the dignity of land. But on this voyage there was no earth, no wood, no sacred river. The British crew recorded a number in the register, tied the corpse to stone or iron, and consigned it to the sea. Ramadhin watched as these burials without graves vanished into the waves, and the sight marked him deeply.

It was no ship, but a moving slaughterhouse,
Where the roar of waves buried the cries of kin.
No shroud was given, no soil bestowed,
Only the ocean's depths scattered life away.

From Ramnaggr to Gandhi Village

Jahaji Ship Brothers: A New Bond, A New Identity

Amid this horror and constant nearness to death, a strange social transformation began. Those once divided by caste, community, and color now shared the same suffering. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras sat in one line and ate the same coarse food. The sea did not ask who had once stood above whom. Its waves erased old distinctions with brutal indifference.

Thus was born the bond of *Jahaji*, ship brotherhood. This tie proved stronger than blood. Those who crossed the *Kala Pani* together began to accept one another as brothers and sisters. Later, this ship brotherhood would become one of the foundations of Indo Trinidadian community, where shared history and shared survival outweighed caste.

The Fear of the Sea and Inner Transformation

The three-month voyage altered the passengers permanently. The endless blue of the sea did not suggest peace. It became a symbol of exile, distance, and dread. Each wave carried them farther from home and closer to an unknown fate. The journey of the *RHONI* was not only a geographical migration. It was a cultural baptism. Those who disembarked were no longer the same people who had boarded in Calcutta. Their eyes no longer carried innocence, but a sorrow that would be passed down through generations. They had seen death at close range, known hunger, and watched the old boundaries of their world dissolve.

When the *RHONI* finally entered the Atlantic and Trinidad's shores appeared in the distance, Ramadhin drew a deep breath. He knew he had survived, but he also knew that part of him had been buried forever in those waters. The tragedy of *Kala Pani* would remain, for future generations, not only a story of suffering, but a story of endurance.

Religion, Survival, and the Making of a New Community

The voyage did not merely carry bodies across the ocean. It also carried faiths, rituals, and inherited ways of understanding the world. Before the arrival of Indian laborers, Trinidad had already been shaped by European colonial religions. Under French and Spanish influence, Roman Catholicism held a dominant place, while British rule strengthened Anglican and other Protestant traditions. Alongside them, enslaved Africans had brought their own spiritual systems, including Orisha worship, ritual drumming, and sacred forms of communal expression. Over time, these beliefs interacted with one another and became part of a changing Creole religious landscape.

When Indian laborers arrived in Trinidad, they brought Hinduism and Islam with them. Estimates suggest that a large majority were Hindu, while a significant minority were Muslim, many of them from the farming communities of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. In the unfamiliar world of estate life, distinctions of caste and religion often softened under the pressure of common hardship. They became *Jahaji* brothers and sisters, joined first by suffering, then by survival.

Life in Trinidad tested everyone equally. Hard labor, poverty, and the strangeness of a foreign environment placed immense strain on all. Yet those same conditions drew people closer. Hindus and Muslims from different regions and social backgrounds laid the foundations of a new community together. They built mosques and temples, observed their festivals, and kept language and custom alive as best they could.

These shared sacrifices became part of Trinidad's cultural fabric. Even today, Hindus and Muslims in Trinidad bear a legacy shaped by the hard work, patience, and unity of their forebears. Their story reminds us that, in the crucible of hardship, walls of caste and creed can weaken, and a more human identity can emerge.

A traveler walking through Trinidad may hear the *azaan* rising from a mosque at dusk, blending with evening *bhajans* from a*mandir*, while the bells of a Catholic church or the hymns of a Spiritual Shouter Baptist mission sound nearby. These voices do not necessarily cancel one another. They form part of a shared atmosphere of coexistence. It is not uncommon to find a steeple, a minaret, and a *murti* within the same landscape, reminders of the *Jahaji* spirit that helped diverse traditions blossom side by side.

What census numbers can never fully capture is the intimacy of daily life: a Hindu woman buying roti from a Muslim baker for *Phagwa*, a Christian neighbor sharing sweets at Eid, a child growing up hearing several sacred languages without fully separating them. In these small acts, Trinidad's religious history becomes visible not as abstraction, but as lived accommodation and mutual regard.

Woman Who Never Went Home: Mahadai Jaggernath Persad

If the sea voyage created a wound that shaped generations, some lives carried that wound with extraordinary intensity. One such life was that of Mahadai Jaggernath Persad who lived in Cedros.

Cedros is a quiet village in southwestern Trinidad, only a few miles from Venezuela. Locals say it was once thick with cedar trees, and that this is how the village received its name. Families often go there for fresh homemade coconut oil.

Stories about her had circulated in whispers. She was said to be a woman who had crossed the *Kala Pani* as a young girl and never returned. A survivor. One of the last.

Bhanu, with her mother and elder sister, who both spoke Bhojpuri, traveled to Cedros to meet Mahadai. With a charged video camera ready, the visit carried the same feeling as a pilgrimage.

The house was hard to find. Cedros was small, yet finding Mahadai felt like searching for a fading memory. At last, a shopkeeper pointed toward a wooden house nearby. Neighbors gathered. Someone went to fetch her. Benches and chairs were pulled out, and there was a sense, even before she appeared, that something solemn was about to unfold.

Then she came.

She was tiny, thin as a branch. A scarf was tied around her head, not an *orhni* in the older style, but a simple bandana knotted at the nape of her neck. She carried a stick, though she did not lean on it. Slowly, carefully, she descended three wooden steps and walked towards her visitors.

She pressed her hands together.

Then she began to cry.

Silent tears streamed down her wrinkled face.

No one knew what to say at first. Bhanu's mother gently asked, "Why are you crying, Mai?"

Mahadai wiped her cheeks and spoke.

"I am one hundred and three years old," she said. "I live alone. I climb these steps every day. I have no children. No one."

She paused.

"But I still hope," she whispered, "that before I die, I can go back home."

Home, for her, did not mean Trinidad. It meant India.

She recounted her journey. She had been dressed beautifully that day, on her way to a wedding in her neighborhood. A friend had called out playfully, inviting her to come to the docks for “a little adventure.” Young and curious, she followed. She did not know she was boarding a ship. She did not know she was leaving India forever.

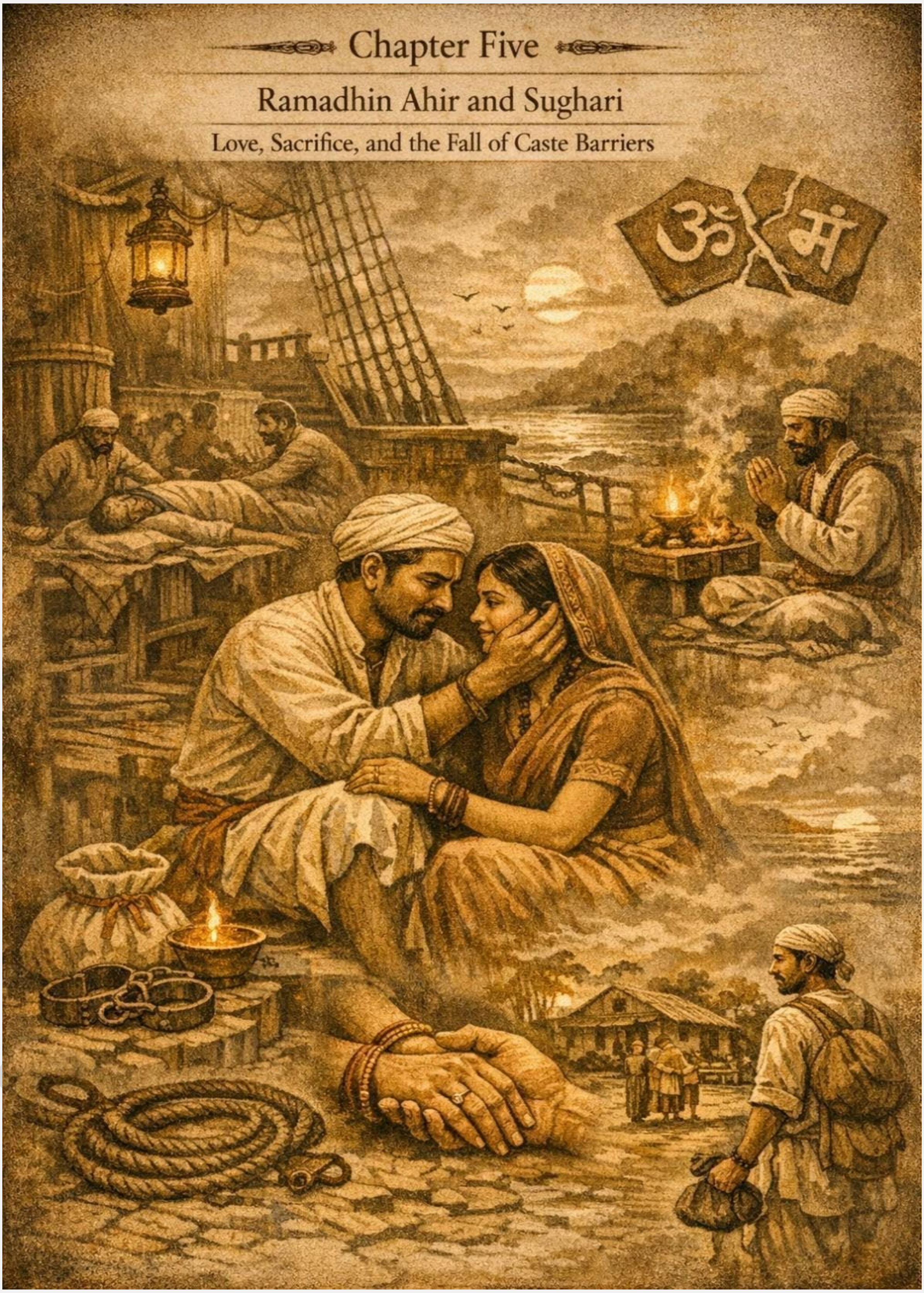
When she arrived in Trinidad, there was no easy way to send word home. No post office. No letter. No one around her who spoke her language. No means of telling her mother that she was alive. She said she wept for years and never entirely stopped. She never married. Never had children. There remained only the wooden house, the scarf, the stick, and a hope that refused to die.

To sit with her was to feel that the *Kala Pani* had not ended when the ship reached land. For some, it continued inwardly, day after day, across an entire lifetime.

Some journeys never truly end. Some people spend their whole lives trying to cross back over a water that offers no return.

Mahadai Jaggernath Persad did not cross the *Kala Pani* only once. In memory, longing, and unfinished desire, she crossed it every day of her long life.

And still, she was trying to cross it back.


Chapter Five
Ramadhin Ahir and Sughari
Love, Sacrifice, and the Fall of Caste Barriers
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Chapter Five: Ramadhin Ramsahai and Sughari Love, Sacrifice and the Fall of Caste Barriers

On the deck of the *RHONI*, where death moved on one side and the terrifying waters of the *Kala Pani* tested human endurance on the other, life was quietly seeking another path. It was during this turbulent voyage that Ramadhin Ramsahai met Sughari. Their meeting was more than the crossing of two passengers. It brought together two very different social worlds in a union that would later be remembered as one of the quiet foundations of Indo-Trinidadian society.

Social Background and Traditional Barriers

Ramadhin Ramsahai belonged to a respected Yadav, or Ahir, family from Ramnagar near Allahabad, a lineage that carried recognized standing within the social fabric of North India. Sughari, by contrast, is remembered as having come from a community considered lower caste within the rigid hierarchy of the time. Under ordinary village conditions, even conversation between such two people would have invited scrutiny. Marriage would have been nearly unthinkable. In that world, a person's worth was too often judged less by character than by birth.

Yet the vastness of the ocean and the darkness of the ship's cramped cabins began to weaken those old divisions. When hunger strikes without discrimination, when disease spares neither caste nor color, and when death stands equally near to all, the old order begins to lose its certainty. Ramadhin, known for his strength and courage, saw in Sughari a resilience and honesty that moved him deeply.

A Bond Growing at Sea

During the three-month voyage, Ramadhin and Sughari became companions in sorrow and consolation. Whether she traveled alone or had already suffered loss on the voyage, she appears in family memory as someone vulnerable within an unforgiving passage, and Ramadhin as someone who offered protection and steadiness. For him, she became a form of shelter in the midst of exile, a human presence that softened the ache of what had been left behind.

Their conversations, as later remembered and reconstructed, seem to have turned toward the villages they had left, the worlds they had known, and the fears waiting on Trinidad's shores. Ramadhin, literate in Hindi and Urdu, shared religious stories and words of encouragement with Sughari, comforting not only her but others around them. Slowly, companionship deepened into a bond even stronger than ship brotherhood. It became a partnership of life.

Breaking the Walls of Caste: A Revolutionary Step

Ramadhin's decision to choose Sughari as his life partner was revolutionary for its time. He knew that if he ever returned to India, his community might never accept such a union. His parents, his brothers, his entire village could have declared him outcaste. But the *Kala Pani* had altered his vision. He had seen that Brahmin blood was as red as Shudra blood, and that the sea made no distinction between them.

That choice reveals that Ramadhin was more than a laborer caught in colonial machinery. He was a man capable of placing human love above inherited oppression. His union with Sughari anticipated a new social world in Trinidad, one in which Yadavs, Mishras, Kumhars, Chamars, and others would gradually be drawn into a broader identity: Indo-Trinidadian. Their bond resisted a system that reduced people to numbers and helped open the way toward another kind of belonging.

Migration and a New Dimension of Identity

As the ship neared Trinidad, Ramadhin and Sughari had already become each other's support in the unknown land ahead. They offered one another the sense of home that migration had stolen. Sughari brought balance and tenderness into Ramadhin's life, helping him endure the grueling days that awaited them.

Their love story was not only emotional. It carried a social significance. It suggested that survival in the new world would depend less on inherited division than on shared endurance. Had Ramadhin remained trapped within caste stigma, he might not have withstood the loneliness and upheaval of migration. Sughari became his anchor, holding him steady in the storm.

The Beginning of a Legacy

Today, when one looks at the descendants of Ramadhin Ramsahai and Sughari in Trinidad, the merit of their decision becomes clear. They gave their children a legacy less burdened by caste boundaries. Their son, Ramawad, and the generations that followed grew up as the heirs of two people who dared to build a new life amid the waves of the ocean.

Ramadhin and Sughari's union challenged both the cruelty of indenture and the rigidity of caste. It suggested that where love and sacrifice endure, even a forced migration can become the beginning of another life. Their partnership marked an important turning point in the story of Trinidad's Indians, setting a foundation for a more united future.

The Forbidden Bridge

In the villages of North India in the nineteenth century, social life was ordered through countless visible and invisible boundaries. Every morning, women gathered at the well with brass pots balanced on their hips. They drew water, exchanged gossip, and moved within a world governed by quiet judgment. Everyone knew, often without needing to be told, whose vessel could touch whose. One family's pot could share the ledge with another's; another's could not. Such rules seemed ordinary because they were woven into everyday life.

Now imagine loving someone whose pot was not allowed to touch yours.

That was the world many Indian laborers left behind when they boarded ships bound for Mauritius, Guyana, Fiji, and Trinidad. It was not only a world of famine and poverty, but one in which caste was written onto the body before speech was even heard. Marriage was rarely imagined as a union of souls. It was shaped by family, clan, ritual order, and the preservation of purity.

An inter caste marriage in nineteenth century India was not a passing scandal. It could mean exile. It could mean social death.

On the ship, hunger was stronger than hierarchy. A Brahmin and a Chamar might not have eaten together in the village. But at sea there was one pot of rice, one ladle, one shared condition of need. Hunger made decisions that theology alone could not.

The *arkatis* did not ask about caste. They did not care about *gotra* or *kula*. They asked only whether a body was strong enough for labor. For perhaps the first time in many lives, a Brahmin and a Dalit stood in the same line, pressed the same thumbprint, received the same number, and boarded the same ship.

For some, this was a nightmare. For others, it offered a narrow and dangerous form of escape.

It is possible, and family and diaspora memory sometimes suggests as much, that some couples used indenture to flee social prohibition. In the village, families might have chosen violence or lifelong exclusion. But in the Calcutta depot, no one demanded caste certificates or horoscopes. The British magistrate cared far more for the contract than for ritual hierarchy. In such cases, the *Kala Pani*, feared as a curse, could become an opening, the only road toward a place where love was not automatically forbidden.

The ship was hell. The plantations were hell. The barracks were hell. But for some, hell together was still preferable to a life apart.

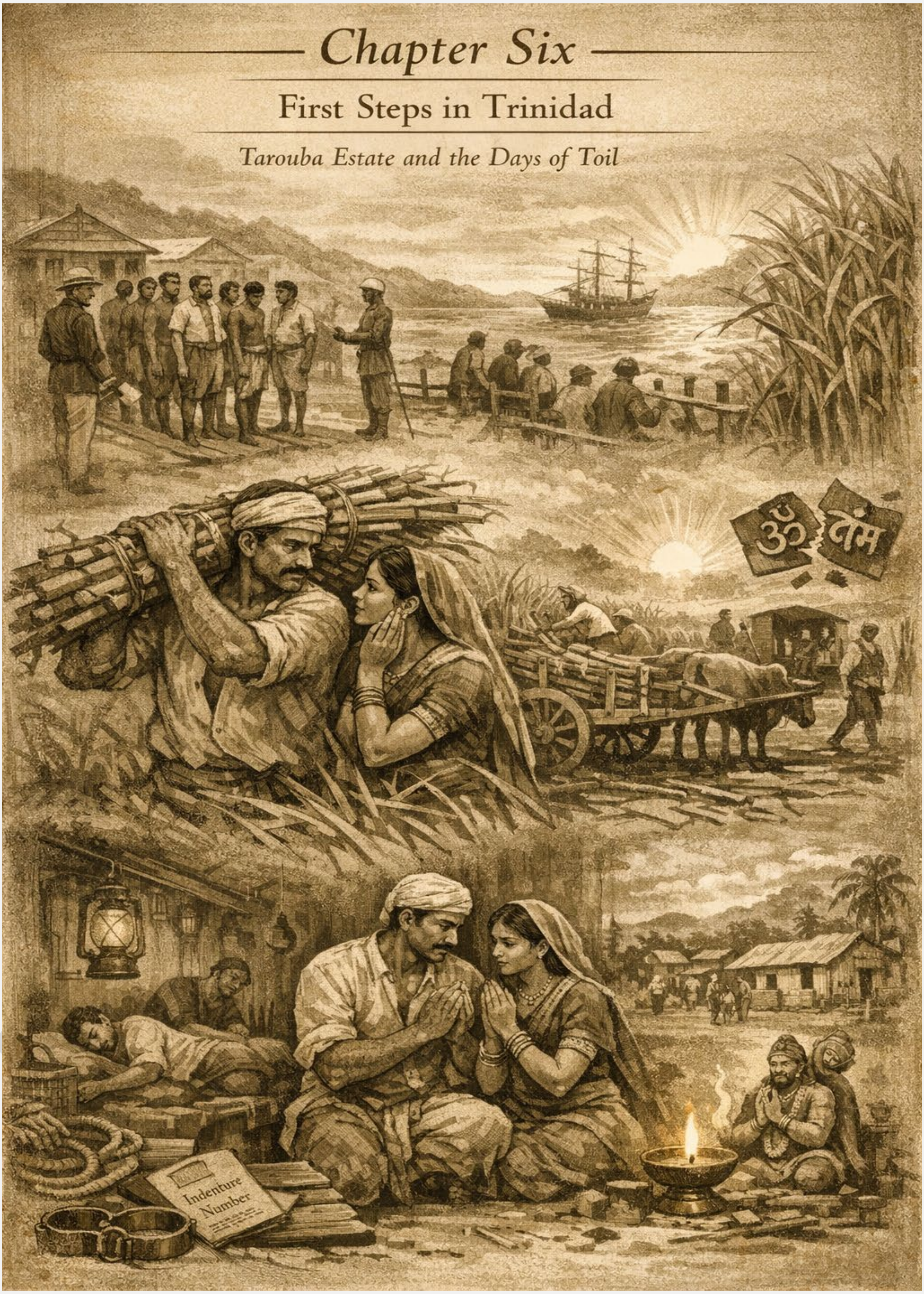
This is one of the hidden dimensions of the *Girmitiya* story. It is not only about labor and punishment, but about the ocean's slow unsettling of caste. Not completely. Not cleanly. But enough. Enough for later generations to cross lines once thought unthinkable. Enough for new settlements to ask not first, *What is your caste?* but rather, *are you kind? Are you strong? Will you stand with us?*

Some would have called this loss, the loss of purity, of order, of custom. But when a wall this high begins to fall, what is truly lost? Chains. Only chains. And what is gained is the possibility of another humanity.

The descendants of those who crossed the ocean together walk freely today. They are doctors, teachers, politicians, and musicians. Many do not know which ancestor was Brahmin and which was Chamar. Many no longer care. They have inherited something greater than purity. They have inherited survival. They have inherited the courage of those who crossed the forbidden bridge, knowing the waters below were dark and the far shore unknown, yet holding hands all the same.

That is not the death of *dharma*. It may be *dharma* finding another name, one large enough to hold all those who loved across a line that should never have been drawn.

From Ramnaggr to Gandhi Village


Chapter Six
First Steps in Trinidad
Tarouba Estate and the Days of Toil
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Chapter Six: First Steps in Trinidad

Tarouba Estate and the Days of Toil

Trinidad's history is a layered one, shaped by Indigenous survival, colonial upheaval, plantation economy, and migration. Long before Columbus arrived in 1498, the Arawak and Carib peoples lived on the island. Spanish rule devastated their societies, and for centuries Trinidad remained a neglected outpost tied to the wider structures of New Spain. A turning point came in 1783 with King Carlos III's *Cedula de Poblacion*, which granted land to foreign settlers, especially French planters from Martinique. They brought enslaved Africans and agricultural knowledge, helping to lay the foundations of sugar and cacao production.

In 1796, British forces seized Trinidad, and by 1802 it was formally ceded to Britain. The abolition of slavery in 1834 created a labor crisis, and after early experiments with other groups failed, the large-scale arrival of Indian indentured laborers began in 1845. That migration permanently reshaped Trinidad's culture and demography. The story of Ramadhin Ramsahai belongs to that larger transformation, one in which hardship, adaptation, and endurance gradually formed a new Indo-Trinidadian world.

After three long and nerve-wracking months at sea, when the masts of the ship *RHONI* finally revealed the green landscapes of Trinidad against the blue horizon of the Atlantic, a new surge of life passed through the weary passengers aboard. Yet the joy was brief. Freedom from the ocean's terror gave way to another kind of bondage, one scarcely gentler than the system they had been promised would uplift them. Ramadhin Ramsahai and Sughari, now bound to one another as life partners, stepped onto the shores of Port of Spain not to garlands of welcome, but to the stern inspection of British officers and the sting of disinfectant spray.

When Ramadhin Ramsahai stepped ashore in 1898, he was not the first Indian to set foot on Trinidad's soil. Fifty-three years earlier, in 1845, the *Fatel Razack* had arrived at Port of Spain carrying 275 laborers. By the time Ramadhin arrived, tens of thousands of Indians had already crossed the *Kala Pani* to the island. They were scattered across estates in places like Couva, Chaguanas, and San Fernando. Some had completed their *Girmit* and accepted land instead of return, forming small settlements of freed laborers. Others remained trapped in cycles of reindenture, their savings never sufficient to secure lasting freedom. Planters treated these earlier immigrants with the same contempt shown to the newly arrived. They lived in cramped barracks, labored under the same task system, and often died in unmarked graves. Yet among them were also the first temple builders, the first school founders, and the first planters of mango trees. The word *Chinidad* was more than a Bhojpuri inflection of Trinidad. It was an unconscious act of cultural reclamation. The migrant ear heard not the English Trinidad, but a sound touched by familiarity, *chini* (sugar), and a land shaped by its cultivation.

Nelson Island: Quarantine and Human Classification

Every *Girmitiya* arriving in Trinidad first passed through quarantine, and for many this meant Nelson Island, a small station where new arrivals were inspected and classified. There, Ramadhin Ramsahai and his *Jahaji* companions were made to stand barefoot while their bodies were examined as though they were livestock in a market. Their names were entered beside immigration numbers; numbers that would now define their place in colonial records. In that bureaucratic moment, Ramadhin Ramsahai ceased, in British eyes, to be a son of Ramnagar and became an indentured unit of labor. From Nelson Island, migrants were dispatched to assigned estates, and Ramadhin and Sughari's fate was tied to Tarouba Estate.

Tarouba Estate: The Hell of Sugarcane Fields

Located in southern Trinidad, Tarouba Estate was a major center of sugar production. When Ramadhin and Sughari arrived, they were shown their barracks: cramped wooden and iron sheet rooms with almost no ventilation. Several families were often forced to share a single room, where privacy scarcely existed. The stench and filth of these quarters made the memory of Ramnagar’s open courtyards and fresh air all the more painful.

Work began at four in the morning before sunrise, laborers were already in the fields. Ramadhin, known for his extraordinary strength, was assigned to cut cane and haul heavy bundles onto estate transport. The cane fields were not simply fields. They were sharp leaved jungles thick with insects, where a moment’s carelessness could open the skin. Sughari was assigned to cutting grass and clearing land. Under the scorching sun, in suffocating humidity and under relentless supervision, both body and mind were pushed toward exhaustion.

The Task System and Economic Exploitation

The most brutal feature of indenture was the task system. Each worker had to complete a fixed daily quota. If the task was not finished by evening, wages were docked or the day was marked absent. Ramadhin saw weaker laborers jailed or heavily fined for failing to meet the required measure.

Wages were so meager that they barely sustained life. Rations consisted of lentils, rice, salted fish, and a little oil, often of poor quality. Ramadhin’s pride was wounded whenever overseers shouted at him or addressed him as “Coolie.” Yet the dignity of the Yadav lineage kept him from bowing inwardly. He worked in silence, using his strength as his shield, knowing that if he broke under oppression, his dream would collapse with him.

Silent Resistance: Worship and Song

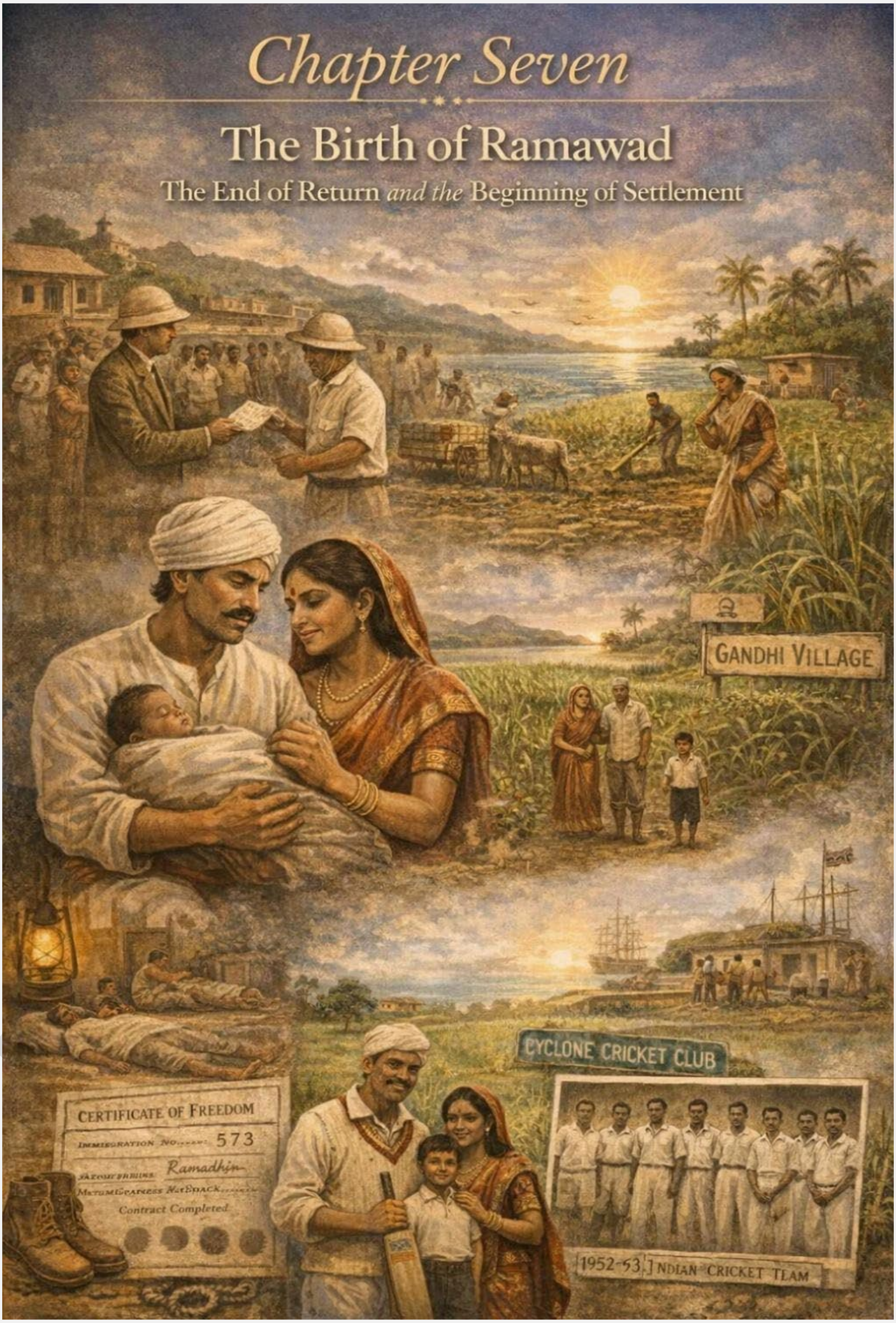
In the dark nights of Tarouba Estate, after their bodies had been shattered by toil, Ramadhin and Sughari lit a small lamp in a corner of their barrack. Faith became their refuge. They quietly recited the *Hanuman Chalisa* and sometimes joined their *Jahaji* companions in softly singing *bhajans*. These acts of worship were not empty ritual. They were a quiet form of cultural resistance.

The estate owners wanted laborers to forget who they were and become nothing more than production machines. But Ramadhin Ramsahai clung to his roots. Despite harsh rules and humiliations, he preserved his Bhojpuri language and his faith. Sughari, with care and devotion, tried to create a little India within that alien land. Their mutual support kept their humanity alive even in Tarouba's harshness.

The Emergence of a New Identity

Those years of toil reshaped Ramadhin Ramsahai's character. He was no longer only a farmer. He was becoming a figure of quiet leadership, someone who inspired others by his steadiness.Tarouba's soil was watered by his sweat, and from that sweat another identity began to take form, what would later be called Indo-Trinidadian.

Ramadhin and Sughari proved that chains can bind the body, but not the spirit. Their labor not only sustained Trinidad's economy. It helped lay the foundation for a future in which their descendants would no longer be seen merely as "Coolies," but as rightful heirs of the land. Tarouba Estate was their prison, yet within its confines they forged the resolve that would one day help give rise to freer settlements such as Gandhi Village.


Chapter Seven
The Birth of Ramawad
The End of Return and the Beginning of Settlement
GANDHI VILLAGE
CYCLONE CRICKET CLUB
CERTIFICATE OF FREEDOM
IMMIGRATION No. 573
Ramadhin
Contract Completed
1952-53 INDIAN CRICKET TEAM

Chapter Seven: The Birth of Ramawad

The End of Return and the Beginning of Settlement

Under the indentured labor system (*Girmit*), the five-year mandatory period of toil was a threshold at which every worker faced the greatest decision of his life. Around 1903, as Ramadhin Ramsahai's first five-year contract neared completion, his name appeared in the Tarouba Estate records among those entitled to claim their "freedom." According to British law, after five years of labor, a worker could either return to India at government expense, remain in Trinidad under a new contract, or accept a small plot of land on which to begin an independent life. For Ramadhin, this was not merely a legal choice. It was the beginning of a profound struggle between his soul and his roots.

The Birth of Ramawad: Life Emerging in Exile

At this time, joy entered the lives of Ramadhin and Sughari with the birth of their son, Ramawad. In the harsh barrack life of Trinidad, the arrival of new life was nothing short of a miracle. Ramawad's first cry shattered the silence of the indenture system, reminding Ramadhin that his responsibilities now reached beyond himself.

Ramawad, was fondly called "The Whale" for the depth of his spirit and strength. He embodied not only the endurance of his parents, but also the tender weight of legacy and love. Thus, "The Whale" became more than a nickname. It evolved into a metaphor for resilience, vastness, and the transformation from brute strength to the gentler responsibility of fatherhood.

Sughari sang the *sohar* songs of childbirth that women in Punjab or Uttar Pradesh villages would sing, even within the barracks. As Ramadhin held his son, he felt the blood of Ramnagar, Allahabad, flowing in the child's veins, but saw the sun of Trinidad shining in his eyes. Ramawad's birth gave new direction to Ramadhin's thoughts of return.

The Dream of Return and Harsh Reality

When Ramadhin left India, his sole aim was to earn money and return after five years. He often told Sughari at night that he would reclaim his land in Ramnagar, build a permanent house, and live with dignity among his community. But after five years of grueling labor, reality was different. His savings were insufficient to support a prosperous life back in India.

Another obstacle was the fear of social ostracism. Having crossed the *Kala Pani* and married a woman of a different caste, Sughari, he knew Ramnagar's traditional society might not accept him. He did not want his son Ramawad to grow up in a place where he would be branded "outcaste."

The Decision to Settle Permanently: A New Land, A New Covenant

When British authorities offered Ramadhin either a return ticket or land in exchange for a Certificate of Freedom, he made a bold choice. He closed the path of return forever. He accepted a small plot of land in southern Trinidad. This decision declared that he was no longer merely an exile, but a resident of the island.

Behind this choice lay a deep philosophy. Ramadhin realized that the "India" he had left now lived only in memory. His life was now rooted in the soil where his son was born. He thought: if he returned, he might be a stranger, but if he stayed, he could be a founder.

From Barracks to His Own Land

Freed from official bondage, Ramadhin and Sughari bid farewell to the barracks of Tarouba Estate. With their modest savings and their son Ramawad, they moved to their own land. There they built their first home from mud and grass. Its walls carried the fragrance of freedom.

They began cultivating sugarcane along with vegetables and rice. Ramadhin's physical strength was now used for his own benefit. Together with other freed *Jahaji* ship brothers, he began forming a small community, one that would later grow into Cooliewood and eventually Gandhi Village.

Deepening the Roots of Legacy

Ramawad's childhood unfolded in those fields. Ramadhin taught him the letters of Hindi and told him stories of Ramnagar, while also teaching him to love this new land. He ensured that his son would not suffer the humiliation he himself had endured. The decision to settle permanently marked a new chapter in the history of Trinidad's Indians. It was the moment when "India" became a memory and "Trinidad" became reality.

Ramadhin Ramsahai sacrificed his longing for his native soil for the future of his lineage. It was this sacrifice that allowed his fourth and fifth generations in Trinidad to live honorable and free lives today. Ramawad's birth was not merely the arrival of a child. It was the declaration that Indian roots had permanently taken hold in Trinidad's soil.

Ramawad: The Architect of a New Generation

While Ramadhin Ramsahai had secured freedom from the indenture system and a small plot of land, the true architect of the family's future would be his son, Ramawad. Born in the shadow of the Tarouba Estate barracks, Ramawad received the finest education available to an Indian boy of his era. He attended Penal Canadian Mission (CM) School and completed his full primary education, which at the time represented the highest level of schooling accessible to children of indentured laborers. This foundation in literacy and numeracy would prove invaluable as he navigated the complex challenges of building a new life in a foreign land.

Dwarika Ramawad: The Melody of Gandhi Village

In the tapestry of Indo-Trinidadian survival, certain figures stand not as warriors or politicians, but as carriers of culture, character, and quiet dignity. Dwarika Ramawad, the only son of Ramawad and Gangajelly, was one such figure.

As the sole child of his parents, Dwarika was the apple of his mother, Gangajelly's eye. She granted him liberties that would have been unthinkable for most children of his time and, by her own admission, she spoiled him, yet not into weakness, but into a man of strong will, deep attachments, and artistic temperament. His uncles, Gangajelly's brothers, who frequently visited the family residence in Cooliewood, later Gandhi Village, doted on him immensely. Dwarika would often ride to Cedar Hill, where two of these uncles lived, and they took him far and near, broadening his horizons beyond the cane fields that surrounded his home.

Despite being the beloved center of a wide family circle, Dwarika's formal education ended at Standard Four. But education, for Dwarika, was never confined to the classroom. His true schooling happened in the open air: among animals, on horseback, and through the strings and keys of musical instruments.

Dwarika had a natural affinity for livestock. He delighted in buying and raising horses, mules, cows, and goats. Riding horses and tending to cattle were not chores for him, but passions, a living connection to the pastoral legacy of the Ahir, Yadav, community, which for centuries in India had revered Lord Krishna as their special deity. Krishna, the divine cowherd of Vrindavan, was himself an Ahir in spirit and association. It was therefore deeply fitting that Dwarika, an Ahir by blood and identity, played the flute, an instrument synonymous with Krishna's enchanting presence. In the humid evenings of Gandhi Village, the sound of Dwarika's flute must have carried not merely melody, but memory: a whispered echo of the banks of the Yamuna, transported across oceans to the Caribbean.

Even Dwarika's name carried this sacred resonance. He was named after the ancient city of Dwarika, Dwarka, where Lord Krishna established his earthly kingdom. In many Indian traditions, naming is never accidental. It is believed that a name retains the vibrations, power, and blessings of the figure it invokes. To carry the name Dwarika was to carry a fragment of Krishna's own legacy, a protector of cows, a player of melodies, a ruler with compassion.

Music flowed through Dwarika as naturally as water through a field. He played the harmonium with skill and the harmonica with ease. At family gatherings, a beautiful synergy unfolded: his wife Soondrie would play the drums, while Dwarika accompanied her on the harmonium. Together, they created not just entertainment, but a living archive of Bhojpuri folk tradition, *biraha*, *sohar*, *bhajan*, and chutney in its purest form. Their home was a conservatory without walls, and their children learned not through formal lessons, but through immersion.

This inheritance proved remarkably durable. Several of Dwarika and Soondrie's children followed naturally in their footsteps. Without any formal training, they learned to sing and play various musical instruments. They sang with enthusiasm and excellence, carrying forward the musical DNA of both parents. The music never needed a school. It had a home.

Dwarika's character was not limited to melody, however. He was a man of firm discipline and high standards, especially regarding the care of animals. His livestock had to live in clean sheds and be fed well. This insistence on order extended to the entire household. The firstborn child of the family, though female, in an era when daughters were often exempted from heavy labor, was taught to bring in huge bundles of fresh grass for the animals residing in sheds at the back of the residence.

No task was beneath anyone, and no one was exempt from responsibility.

Yet Dwarika taught his children primarily by example, not by words or the switch. His silent authority commanded respect. Everyone in the household understood the importance of wearing proper clothing and maintaining decorum, whether inside the home or outside in the community. Visitors were treated with extraordinary generosity: they had to be given the best of whatever was available on the premises. If an article of clothing was loaned to a guest, it was never taken back. This was not carelessness, but a conscious principle rooted in a belief that clothing carries the vibrations of a person. Sharing clothing was therefore not encouraged, not out of stinginess, but out of respect for the subtle energies each body leaves behind.

In these small, daily acts, the refusal to reclaim a loaned shirt, the insistence on clean cattle sheds, the evening flute floating across the cane fields, the harmonium keeping rhythm with his wife’s drums, Dwarika Ramawad embodied the quiet dignity of the *Girmitiya* descendants. He was not a politician or a prime minister. He never sought headlines. But he was the backbone of Gandhi Village: a man who preserved music, animals, hospitality, and the spiritual vibrations of a homeland his grandparents had never stopped loving.

Today, when his grandchildren and great-grandchildren play drums at weddings, chant *bhajans* at the Radha Krishna *Mandir*, or hum old Bhojpuri songs without ever having taken a music lesson, they are not displaying talent alone. They are displaying inheritance. They are playing Dwarika’s flute. They are singing Soondrie’s songs. And in that sound, the journey from Ramnagar to Gandhi Village continues, not as history, but as a living, breathing melody.

The Gamble for Prosperity: Land and Loss

Driven by ambition and the desire to lift his family beyond the cane fields, Ramawad made a bold decision. The family left the oppressive confines of the Tarouba Estate barracks and moved to Tulsa Trace, where they purchased twenty acres of land, a substantial holding that represented hope and possibility. But hope alone does not guarantee success. With entrepreneurial vision, perhaps exceeding their experience, Ramawad and his family mortgaged their newly acquired land to purchase a bus, venturing into the transport business. It was a risk that did not pay dividends. Lacking familiarity with the enterprise, they watched their investment collapse, and with it, the mortgaged lands slipped from their grasp. The family was left with nothing but the clothes on their backs and the resilience in their hearts.

The Long Road Back: From San Juan to Tamboulatay

Stripped of their land and their dreams, Ramawad and his family did not surrender to despair. With the kindness of fellow ship travelers who had crossed the same unforgiving ocean, they found temporary refuge on Jogie Road in San Juan, north Trinidad. These *Jahaji* ship brothers and their families opened their doors, sharing whatever meager shelter and food they could spare. It was a lifeline born of a bond stronger than blood, the bond of those who had survived the ocean together.

From this humble base, Ramawad and his family began to rebuild, penny by penny, season by season. They saved with relentless discipline until they could purchase another twenty acres of land, this time in a place called Tamboulatay, also known as Tamboulay. There, they turned their backs on the brutal sugarcane economy that had enslaved their parents' generation. Instead, they focused on gardening, planting corn, and other vegetables. The corn grew tall and golden, a harvest of hope.

Every week, Ramawad loaded his produce onto a cart and made the journey to the San Fernando market. There, among the stalls heavy with vegetables and the chatter of merchants, he met Babu Harnarayansingh, a man from Cooliewood who saw in Ramawad a determination that deserved a better home. Babu Harnarayansingh encouraged the family to leave Tamboulatay and move to Cooliewood, where a new community of Indians was building something more than survival: they were building dignity.

That advice would change everything. Today, the San Fernando market still stands, bustling and active just a few miles from Gandhi Village, a quiet witness to the journey of a family who refused to stay broken.

From Ashes to Gandhi Village

Forced to start over from absolute zero, Ramawad and his family faced the darkest hour of their journey since the crossing of the *Kala Pani*. Yet it was precisely at this moment of profound loss that opportunity emerged from adversity. Community elders and fellow *Jahaji* ship brothers encouraged the family to relocate to an area in southern Trinidad that would later earn a name that carried dignity rather than derision: Gandhi Village. What had begun as Cooliewood, a settlement named in colonial contempt, was gradually transforming into a community where Indians could reclaim their identity. Ramawad's family brought to this new place not wealth, but something far more valuable: the determination to rise again.

Cricket: A Passion That Bridged Continents

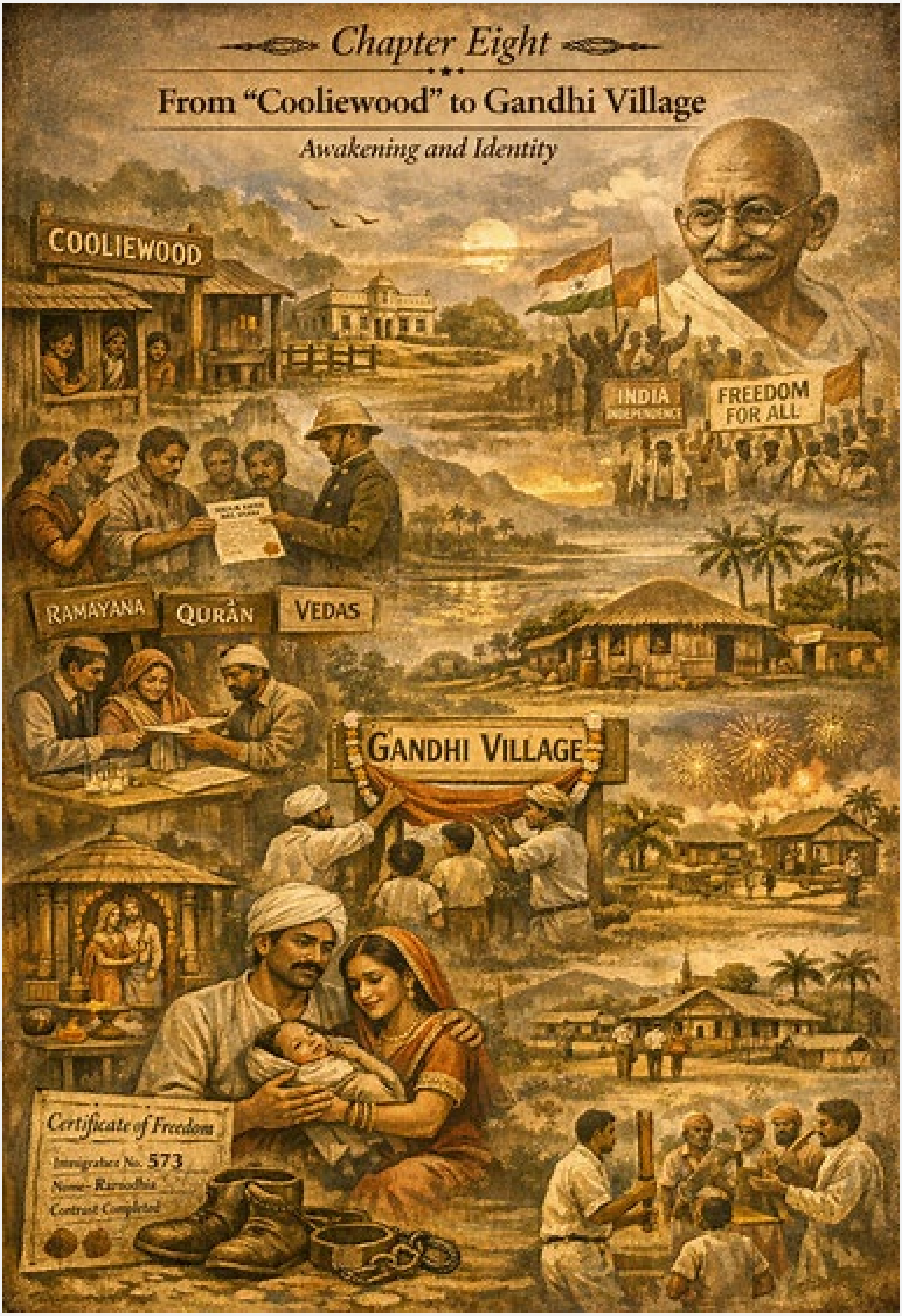
Beyond his struggles with land and commerce, Ramawad possessed a passion that connected him to a larger world: cricket. He was a competent player and a devoted member of the Cyclone Cricket Club, where the camaraderie of sport offered respite from the hardships of daily survival. Among his treasured possessions was a photograph of one of the early cricket teams in Trinidad, a testament to the role of sport in binding together a scattered community.

This love for cricket placed him at the heart of a historic moment. When the first Indian cricket team toured the West Indies in the 1952–53 season, led by the legendary Captain Vijay Hazare and featuring stars like Subhash Gupte, Polly Umrigar, Dattaji Gaekwad, Madhav Apte, and G. S. Ramchand, the local Indian community welcomed them not merely as athletes, but as a homecoming. For Ramawad and thousands like him, watching India play on Trinidadian soil was a profound affirmation of identity. Even when India faced the West Indies on Trinidad's pitches, the descendants of *Girmitiyas* rooted for their ancestral homeland, a quiet but powerful declaration that, though they labored and lived in the Caribbean, their spiritual compass still pointed toward the subcontinent.

The Legacy of Resilience

Ramawad's journey, from primary school student to landowner, from failed businessman to resilient settler, from cricket enthusiast to witness of history, encapsulates the broader story of Indo-Trinidadian survival. His setbacks did not define him; his willingness to begin again did. And in Gandhi Village, he and his family would finally find the stability that had eluded them, planting seeds that future generations would harvest as prosperity and pride.

FROM RAMNAGAR TO GANDHI VILLAGE


Chapter Eight
From "Cooliewood" to Gandhi Village
Awakening and Identity
COOLIEWOOD
INDIA INDEPENDENCE
FREEDOM FOR ALL
RAMAYANA
QURĀN
VEDAS
GANDHI VILLAGE
Certificate of Freedom
Immigration No. 573
Contract Completed

Chapter Eight: From "Cooliewood" to Gandhi Village Awakening and Identity

The decades under the indenture system were not merely years of toil. They were also the period in which a new social identity emerged. In southern Trinidad, near Debe, where Ramadhin Ramsahai and his *Jahaji* ship brothers settled, the settlement was contemptuously called "Cooliewood". In colonial vocabulary, the word "Coolie" was not just a label for labor; it was a term designed to strip Indians of their humanity, culture, and dignity, reducing them to "cheap workers." But by the 1940s and 1950s, as Ramadhin's next generations came of age, a new wave of resistance and consciousness rose from the soil of Cooliewood.

Cooliewood: A Symbol of Colonial Humiliation

Cooliewood was a small settlement with only descendents of Indian indentured workers. The area did not have basic amenities like electricity or running water. In spite of the meagerness of the external facilities available, families here retained their will to survive nurtured powerfully by the wisdom of the *Ramayana*, *Quran*, and the *Vedas*.

Ramadhin Ramsahai's family and neighbors silently endured. They saw their Bhojpuri language dismissed as "broken speech" and their faith branded as "ignorance." But as their children became educated and began to see the wider world, a collective consciousness arose against this derogatory name.

Gandhi's Influence and the Global Freedom Movement

By the mid-twentieth century, India's fight for freedom was reaching far across the seas to Trinidad. Mahatma Gandhi, who had once spoken up for indentured workers in South Africa, became a hero and a symbol of hope for Indians in Trinidad. His ideas of nonviolence, truth, and respect for labor gave the people of Cooliewood a new way to resist unfair treatment.

For them, Gandhi was more than a leader; he was a reminder of home and of their ancestors’ strength. His name carried the fragrance of India, and his struggle gave courage to those who felt forgotten in distant lands. The name “Cooliewood” was a mark of shame, given by colonial rulers to mock the workers. But Gandhi’s example showed that dignity could be reclaimed.

The Birth of Gandhi Village: A Historic Demand

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the youth and elders of Cooliewood held a historic gathering. The renaming of Gandhi Village has been told by different recounts in slightly varying ways. Many have said that Dr. Eric Williams, one of Trinidad’s first political leaders, who became first Prime Minister, had suggested eliminating derogatory terminology that belittled ethnic groups. Village councils were established across the country with members of the village participating in discussions to upgrade community needs. In this context came the name-change of Cooliewood to Gandhi Village. Many have claimed having input in this happening. Ramnarace Dwarika, who was a member of the village council, said that Mr. Chotasun Parriman suggested the name Gandhi (also written as Ghandi).

This was not just an administrative change; it was a declaration of psychological freedom. When the official board bearing the name “Gandhi Village” was installed, residents saw it as their second birth.

Social and Educational Revolution

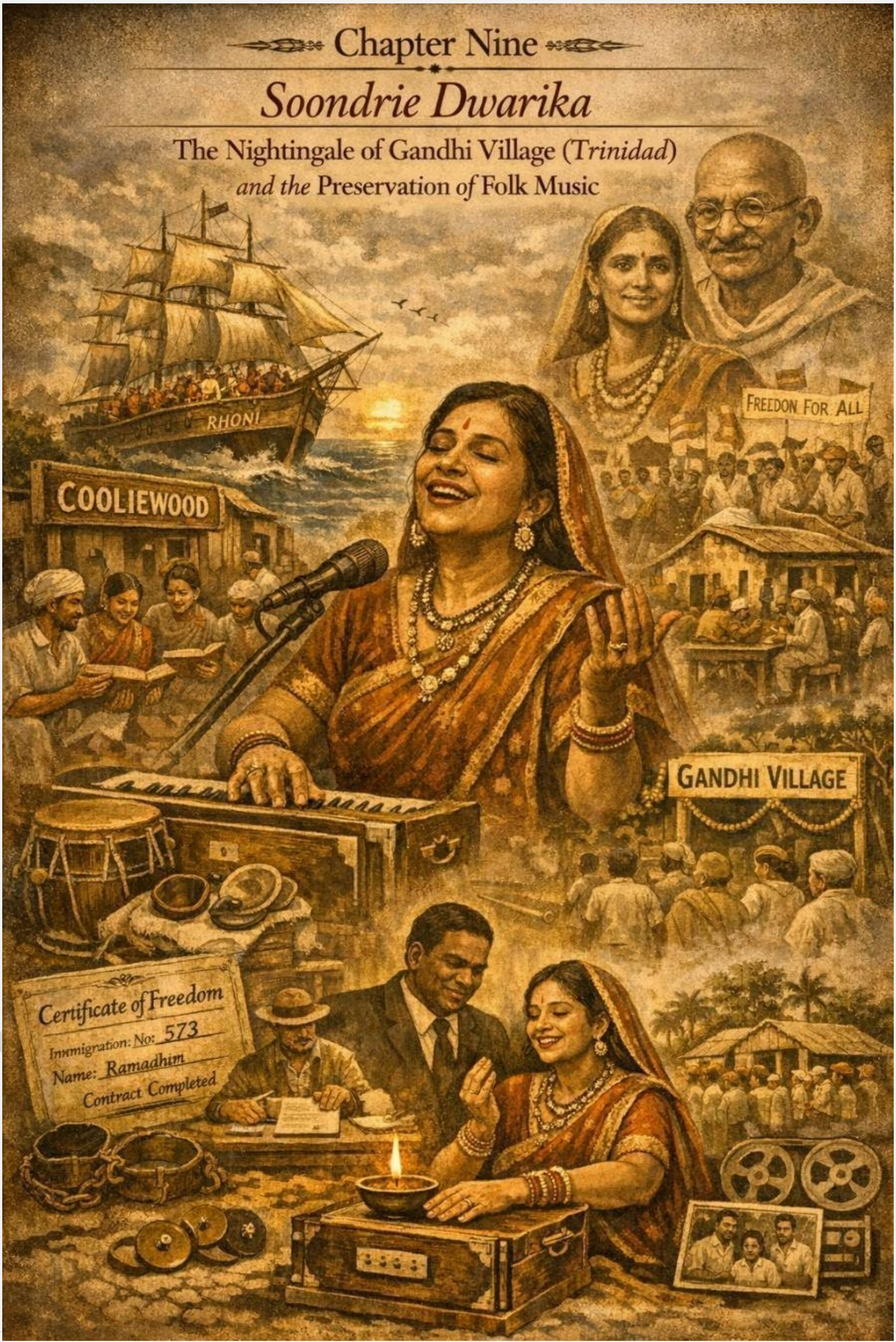
With the name change came a wave of social and educational transformation. Residents built schools and temples through self-help. The Radha Krishna *Mandir* became not only a place of worship, but also a community center where Hindi language, folk music, and religious values were nurtured. Ramadhin Ramsahai’s family played an active role in this transformation, realizing that alongside land ownership, the “ownership of knowledge” was the path that could lift future generations from cane fields to corridors of power.

Gandhi Village was a community in Trinidad where Indians openly embraced and expressed their cultural identity. Festivals like Holi (*Phagwa*), Diwali, and Eid were celebrated with new grandeur. The *bhajans* once sung in hushed voices within barracks now echoed through loudspeakers. Gandhi Village became a “Little India,” where the sweetness of Bhojpuri and the harmony of Ganga-Jamuni culture filled the air.

Preserving the Legacy and Its Message

Today, when visitors pass through Gandhi Village, they marvel at its prosperity and peace. But behind this prosperity lies the sweat of ancestors who never sold their dignity despite hostile conditions. Gandhi Village is not just a village; it is a living monument that tells every passerby: “A person can change their destiny and identity through their labor.”

From Ramnaggr to Gandhi Village


Chapter Nine
Soondrie Dwarika
The Nightingale of Gandhi Village (Trinidad)
and the Preservation of Folk Music
RHONI
COOLIEWOOD
FREEDON FOR ALL
GANDHI VILLAGE
Certificate of Freedom
Inmmigration: No: 573
Name: Ramadhim
Contract Completed

Chapter Nine: Soondrie Dwarika

The Nightingale of Gandhi Village (Trinidad) and the Preservation of Folk Music

When we speak of the cultural voices rising from Trinidad’s sugarcane fields, one name shines like a star: Soondrie Dwarika. Affectionately called the “Nightingale of Gandhi Village,” she was more than a singer; she was the interpreter of the unspoken pain and longing carried by the passengers of the ship *RHONI* in 1898. A daughter-in-law of Ramadhin Ramsahai, this remarkable woman proved that while oceans may alter geography, the fragrance of Ramnagar’s soil could never fade.

Music: Healing for Exile, Weapon for Survival

For indentured laborers, music was not mere entertainment; it was a balm for their wounds. After long, backbreaking days in the fields, they returned to their barracks and found solace in the rhythms of the *dholak*, *manjira*, and harmonium. The *bhajans* and *birahas* sung in those moments reminded them of their humanity. Soondrie grew up in this environment, learning ancient folk songs from her mother and grandmother, songs passed down through generations.

Her voice carried a natural sorrow that instantly transported listeners across seven seas to the villages of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Her renditions of *sohar* songs for childbirth and *biraha* songs of separation cast a spell over Gandhi Village. Through these songs, she kept alive the Bhojpuri language that kept alive the ancestral bond.

Gandhi Village's Cultural Heart

Soondrie's home in Gandhi Village was more than a dwelling; it was a cultural institution. It was not only a place of music, but also a place where the younger generation was introduced to its roots. When "Cooliewood" was renamed "Gandhi Village," her voice gave soul to the celebration. She composed songs that narrated the dignity and triumph of laborers.

Her greatest achievement was capturing the journey of indentureship and preserving their stories in her own rustic yet unique rich rhythm.While today's chutney music is infused with modern instruments, Soondrie safeguarded its original folk form. Her *bhajans* carried the spirituality of Ramadhin Ramsahai's era of worship, proving that a woman's art could shape the moral and cultural education of an entire community.

The Voice of Gandhi Village

Soondrie's fame extended beyond Gandhi Village.Her name was spoken with respect across Trinidad. At religious ceremonies and weddings, her presence was considered essential. Her repertoire of folk songs was vast, like a living dictionary. Her songs carried the waves of the Ganga, the coolness of the Himalayas, and the vibrancy of Allahabad's fairs.

At a time when English and Western culture were sweeping through Trinidad's Indian community, Soondrie stood firm like a rock. Through her sari, her language, and her singing, she proved that pride in one's identity is the greatest success. Her voice told the third and fourth generations of indentured workers: "Your ancestors were not 'Coolies,' but custodians of a great artistic heritage."

The Sacred Badge: The *Kanthi* and the *Sattvic* Life

In the Hindu community of Trinidad and Tobago, the *Kanthi*, or *Kanthi mala*, serves as a sacred badge of faith and a visible vow of purity. Typically crafted from the wood of the holy *Tulsi* plant and received during *Diksha* initiation, these beads are worn by both men and women as a powerful symbol of divine protection against negative energies. Beyond its spiritual role, the *Kanthi* acts as a vital social identifier: it signals that the wearer has transitioned into a disciplined, *Sattvic* lifestyle, strictly adhering to vegetarianism and remaining non-alcoholic. Within the local diaspora, wearing these sacred beads signifies a profound contract with the Divine, marking the individual as a practitioner of mindfulness, devotion, and a life set apart for higher spiritual purpose.

In the early days, Ramadhin, his wife Sughari, and their son Ramawad all wore the *Kanthi* faithfully. Yet life's trials tested their vows. Ramawad, after being bitten by a coral snake, it was said, was urged to drink alcohol to numb the pain. In that moment, he removed his *Kanthi* and never returned to the practice. Sughari, too, was asked to relinquish hers when she grew fond of the roasted salted fish sold in the family's small business, a taste that conflicted with the vow of purity. These stories reveal how the *Kanthi*, while sacred, also became a measure of human struggle: a symbol not only of devotion, but of the fragile balance between spiritual discipline and worldly desire.

Legacy and Documentation

Linguists and historians believe that, without Soondrie, many rare Bhojpuri songs in Trinidad might have been lost forever. She not only sang them, but preserved their spirit. Even after her passing, her voice echoes in the lanes of Gandhi Village. Her family, especially her children and grandchildren, continued this artistic legacy, embodied today in the Soondrie & Dwarika Community Centre.

Her life teaches us that a nation’s history is not built only by kings or wars, but also by singers and artists who keep singing their soil’s songs in the hardest of times. Soondrie Dwarika was a cultural ambassador for Indo-Trinidadians. Her voice was living proof that the soil Ramadhin Ramsahai carried in his bundle had grown into a mighty tree, now blossoming with flowers of music. Her nightingale-like voice still proclaims across Trinidad’s horizon:

“India beats within our hearts.”

Soondrie Dwarika: The Nightingale of Gandhi Village (Article)

Trinidad is not merely a place; it is an alchemy. It is where South America's ancient breath meets the Caribbean's rhythm, a crucible where the world's grief, borne on slave ships and indentured vessels, was poured into humid soil and distilled into steelpan's thunder, calypso's wit, and the defiant joy of Carnival. To find it, do not look at a map. Listen instead for the song it planted in the blood of its people: a vibration of survival, now a soaring, self-made flight.

The story of sugar in Trinidad is inseparable from the story of its people. Across generations, this single crop shaped karma, culture, and identity, leaving behind a legacy of both *kasht* and *mithaas*. During the era of slavery, 1700–1838, sugarcane spread across the island, cultivated through the suffering of enslaved Africans. Their pain laid the foundation of the economy, though few could have imagined that sugar would one day give birth to a society woven from many peoples and paths.

When slavery ended, the plantations endured. Destiny turned again toward hardship. In 1845, indentureship began with the arrival of Indian laborers aboard the *Fatel Razack*. Bound by five-year *girmit* contracts and false promises of comfort, they crossed the *Kala Pani*, carrying little more than faith, memory, and endurance.

By 1917, nearly 140,000 Indians had arrived in Trinidad. Alongside their labor, they brought *dharma*, *sanskaar*, language, and song. The glow of *deeyas* during Diwali, the colors of *Phagwa*, and the sounds of *bhajans* and *chautaal* slowly settled into estate barracks and villages. This land, shaped by sugar, became "Chinidad," where Indian tradition met Caribbean soil and a new cultural world took form.

But Trinidad's alchemy was not forged only in cane fields. It was carried in the voices of griots and pundits, in the drums of Shango and tassa, in the chants of Hosay and the hymns of Anglican choirs. Each community brought its own rhythm, and together they composed a symphony of survival. Africans, Indians, Chinese, Portuguese, Syrians, and Europeans all bore the weight of labor, but also the gift of memory. Out of hardship grew a mosaic of faiths and festivals: Carnival and Diwali, Hosay and Christmas, *Phagwa* and Emancipation Day.

Sugar was the axis, but culture became the orbit. The cane fields were not only sites of toil; they were classrooms of endurance, where languages blended, where Bhojpuri met Creole, and where Hindi prayers echoed alongside African drumming. Out of this crucible emerged a people who refused erasure. They carried forward not only crops, but cosmologies; not only sweat, but stories.

Trinidad's soil absorbed grief, but it also yielded resilience. The sweetness of *mithaas* was never separate from the bitterness of *kasht*. Each generation inherited both the burden of history and the blessing of creativity. Steelpan rose from discarded oil drums, calypso from the wit of the street, chutney from the mingling of folk melodies. Every art form was an answer to suffering, a declaration that life could be remade from fragments.

Thus Trinidad became more than geography. It became a vibration, a testament, a living archive of survival. To walk its land is to feel the pulse of centuries, to hear echoes of ships and factories, temples and *mas* camps, cane fields and *panyards*. To know Trinidad is to know that endurance can be transmuted into joy, that grief can be distilled into song, and that a people, though scarred, can rise in rhythm and light.

It was within this long current of history that "Soondrie Ramsawak" was born, a daughter of indenture, rooted in the sugar estates. Her childhood reflected both hardship and relative comfort. Her father's supervisory role on the estate provided a measure of stability and access to a credit *khata* at the village shop, a small privilege that offered her early glimpses of dignity amid scarcity. This balance of struggle and security shaped her strength, her sense of responsibility, and her quiet resilience.

As the youngest child, Soondrie often accompanied her mother to *shaadis*, childbirth rituals, and *pujas*. In these spaces of shared life, she absorbed folk songs passed from mouth to ear, from heart to heart. Music became her *parampara*, a tradition learned through devotion rather than instruction. Over time, her voice matured into something deeply expressive. At village *yagnas*, her *bhajans* flowed naturally alongside recitations from the *Ramayana*. People began to call her a nightingale, for her voice carried both *bhakti* and truth, weaving prayer into melody and memory into song.

Her most powerful contribution emerged through a song that gave voice to the pain of indentured life. Drawing from ancestral suffering, she composed lyrics that spoke of broken promises and endurance. The line, “Maitoe aaya Chinidad ko naukaria ho…,” captured the sorrow of those who had believed in a kinder fate, only to find hardship awaiting them. Her language was not bound to one tongue; it blended Bhojpuri, Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, and English, reflecting the lived speech of plantation life. Accompanying herself on the *dholak* or harmonium, she transformed music into *itihaas*, history preserved through melody, testimony carried in rhythm.

Her songs were more than art; they were archives of survival. Each verse carried echoes of ships crossing the *Kala Pani*, of cane fields heavy with sweat, of barracks filled with longing. In her voice, grief became remembrance, and remembrance became resistance. She sang not only for her generation, but for those yet to come, ensuring that the story of indenture would not vanish into silence.

In this way, Soondrie’s music stood as both lament and legacy. It was a bridge between past and present, between ancestral pain and communal strength. Her nightingale voice reminded her people that even within hardship, there was dignity; even within sorrow, there was song. And in the alchemy of Trinidad, where grief was distilled into rhythm, her melodies became part of the island's larger symphony of survival.

As Trinidad entered the era of large sugar factories, 1917–1975, industrial life reshaped the rhythm of communities. The sugar factory at Usine Ste. Madeleine became the *naadi*, the pulse of daily existence. Work, worship, celebration, and grief all moved to its rhythm, as the factory whistle marked the tempo of life itself. Cane fields stretched endlessly, and the smoke rising from chimneys became a symbol of both sustenance and struggle.

It was within the industrial age that Soondrie's life took a decisive turn. At the age of thirteen, she married Dwarika Ramawad and moved from Esperance to Gandhi Village. This settlement, deeply rooted in Indian life, was marked by long rows of cane fields and barracks that defined the horizon, carrying with them the legacy of indentured labor and ancestral memory.

Gandhi Village, located near Debe in southern Trinidad, was once called Cooliewood. In 1958, Trinidad's Prime Minister, Dr. Eric Williams, renamed it Gandhi Village, giving the community a new identity, one that symbolized freedom, culture, and struggle.

For Soondrie Dwarika, this village became more than a place to live; it was the stage upon which her voice rose. She was celebrated as the "Nightingale of Gandhi Village," embodying the spirit of her people through song and story. The village itself became renowned for its vibrant Diwali illuminations, its enduring Indian cultural traditions, and the statue of Mahatma Gandhi that stood as a beacon of resilience and dignity.

The transition after marriage demanded immense *sahan-shakti*. Coming from a relatively sheltered home, she now faced exhausting labor: tending cattle, hauling grass, water, and molasses, and walking long distances through cane fields under the blazing sun. Dwarika, her husband, an only child raised with indulgence, carried a short temper, yet between them grew a companionship forged in necessity. His reliance on her strength and judgment sustained their *grihastha jeevan* through years of struggle, and together they learned to balance hardship with endurance.

Her entry into the household marked a spiritual rebirth. Her father-in-law renamed her "Mahadai," invoking the protection of Lord Mahadeo and welcoming her into a sacred lineage. Names carried power, and this new identity became both shield and blessing. Her greatest support came from her mother-in-law, "Gangajellie," lovingly called "Mai," who encouraged her to raise a large family. Mai embodied the wisdom of tradition, performing daily oil massages for the health of the children, nurturing them with patience and ritual.

In this home, fourteen children were born. Two children , however, passed away in childhood. Family lore recalls that the village midwife, before laying the first child to rest, pierced a tiny hole in his ear with a needle, saying it would serve as a mark so that if the child returned to the family, he could be recognized. Years later, one of the younger boys was indeed born with a small hole in his ear, just like the kind made for earrings. Each evening, "Daada" gathered the grandchildren and recited moral stories from the *Ramayana*, quietly shaping their sense of right and wrong. The barracks may have echoed with the noise of labor, but within the household, discipline, devotion, and storytelling created a sanctuary of values.

Life in Gandhi Village was not only about survival; it was about continuity. The rhythms of the sugar factory intertwined with the rhythms of family life. Festivals lit up the settlement: Diwali lamps glowing against the dark cane fields, *Phagwa* colors bursting across dusty yards, tassa drums echoing during weddings and *yagnas*. Mahadai's voice, already known in her youth, now became part of this communal soundscape. Her *bhajans* rose above the hum of daily toil, reminding her family and neighbors that faith could soften the weight of hardship.

Her journey from Soondrie to Mahadai was more than a change of name; it was a transformation of spirit. She became the axis around which her household turned, balancing labor with love, tradition with adaptation, and grief with resilience. In her story, one sees not only the endurance of a woman, but the endurance of a people who carried the burdens of history yet continued to build homes, raise families, and sing songs of survival.

Life demanded not only devotion, but enterprise. After a family bus business faltered, the household turned to farming and dairy work. Mahadai assisted her father-in-law in selling produce and milk, gradually expanding beyond survival. What began with *hari sabzi* grew into a thriving trade in dry goods.. Her sharp instincts for commerce transformed the household economy. The business flourished to such an extent that Dwarika left his job at the Pointe-à-Pierre oil fields to work alongside her, recognizing that her vision had become the family's lifeline.

Their children became partners in this *vyavsaay*. Twin daughters, known as Mattie and Goma, earned the name "adding machines," calculating accounts mentally with remarkable accuracy. Through their effort, the family acquired transport vehicles and distributed goods across the island, building prosperity through honesty and discipline. The rhythm of trade became the rhythm of family life, each child contributing to the collective enterprise, each hand strengthening the household's foundation.

Yet Mahadai's vision extended beyond economics. She challenged the norms of her time by insisting on education. In an era when girls' schooling was discouraged, she attempted to send her eldest daughter, Bissoondaye to high school. Though early efforts met resistance, her *sankalp* did not weaken. Six of her children completed secondary education, a remarkable achievement in that era. Her eldest son, Ramnarace, finished a five-year high school program in just three years, balancing study with demanding farm chores, cutting grass and delivering milk before classes each morning. In this way, Mahadai planted seeds of discipline and aspiration, ensuring that her children's future would not be confined to the cane fields.

The values she nurtured bore fruit beyond the family. Her children became agents of *seva* in their community. One son helped bring pipe-borne water to the village, transforming daily life for neighbors who had long relied on wells and rivers. A daughter served in the Red Cross, carrying forward the spirit of service learned at home and tending to the vulnerable with compassion. Others contributed through teaching, trade, and quiet acts of generosity.

Mahadai's household became more than a family; it grew into a center of continuity, where tradition and progress coexisted. Her story mirrors the larger story of Trinidad itself: a people who, despite hardship, transformed survival into prosperity and grief into resilience. Through her labor, vision, and steadfast values, she ensured that her children and grandchildren inherited not only land and livelihood, but also dignity, discipline, and devotion.

In 1985, sorrow slipped quietly into the household and never truly departed. That year, Dwarika Ramawad met his untimely end. His death was not only the loss of a husband and father, but the breaking of a rhythm shared for decades. The home itself felt altered; silences grew heavier, and familiar routines lost their ease.

Yet Soondrie blossomed, like a flower opening after Dwarika's departure. In her solitude, she did not present herself as broken. She stood powerfully strong for the children, who looked to her even though they were grown and independent. Each morning, she lifted her voice in songs of protection, sending blessings to all her children scattered across the world. She carried grief with inward strength. Though high blood pressure weakened her body, she remained the emotional center of the family. She continued to guide, to listen, and to steady those around her. Her *bhajans* grew softer, often sung alone, as if each note were a prayer offered in remembrance. The house gradually grew quieter as age advanced, and the absence of her companion was felt in every corner.

Yet even in sorrow, she did not disappear. She remained in remembered songs, in habits passed down, and in values quietly practiced. Her life became a continuing *ashirvaad*, shaping lives long after her passing.

From cane fields to marketplaces, from sacred verses to family homes, her journey mirrors the larger journey of Trinidad itself. Shaped by loss, sustained by faith, and strengthened through love and labor, her life stands as a testament to endurance. She is remembered not only as a daughter of indenture, but as a matriarch whose spirit continues to dwell in the hearts of generations.

In her final days, she dressed with care to attend a wedding, where she was asked to sing. Returning home, she felt discomfort and was rushed to the local hospital. A sudden brain hemorrhage claimed her life, with two daughters at her side. In those last moments, she opened her eyes, reflecting what seemed like rainbow colors. A patient nearby urged her daughter, “Give her a few drops of water and close her eyes.” Some believe this gesture marked her acceptance of the end.

It was early morning. The tropical sun brightened the ward, and a gentle breeze flowed through the open window. The doctor spoke quietly with another patient at the far end. Two of Soondrie’s daughters sat at her feet. Her toenails were polished red, her skin freshly sponged with a soft fragrance, and her white gown embroidered with small, colorful flowers. Though silent, she seemed to communicate wordlessly with her younger daughter, who felt the vibrations of her presence. A single question echoed: “Why are the boys taking so long?” Her sons had gone in search of a nursing home. In hindsight, it seems she knew she was leaving and longed for her sons to be near.

When Mahadai left this world on July 3, 2002, the loss was felt deeply. Children, grandchildren, neighbors, and friends mourned as though a pillar had fallen. The voice that once filled courtyards and prayer gatherings was now silent, leaving behind a stillness that lingered long after the rituals were complete. Grief did not arrive as a single moment, but settled slowly, becoming a presence.

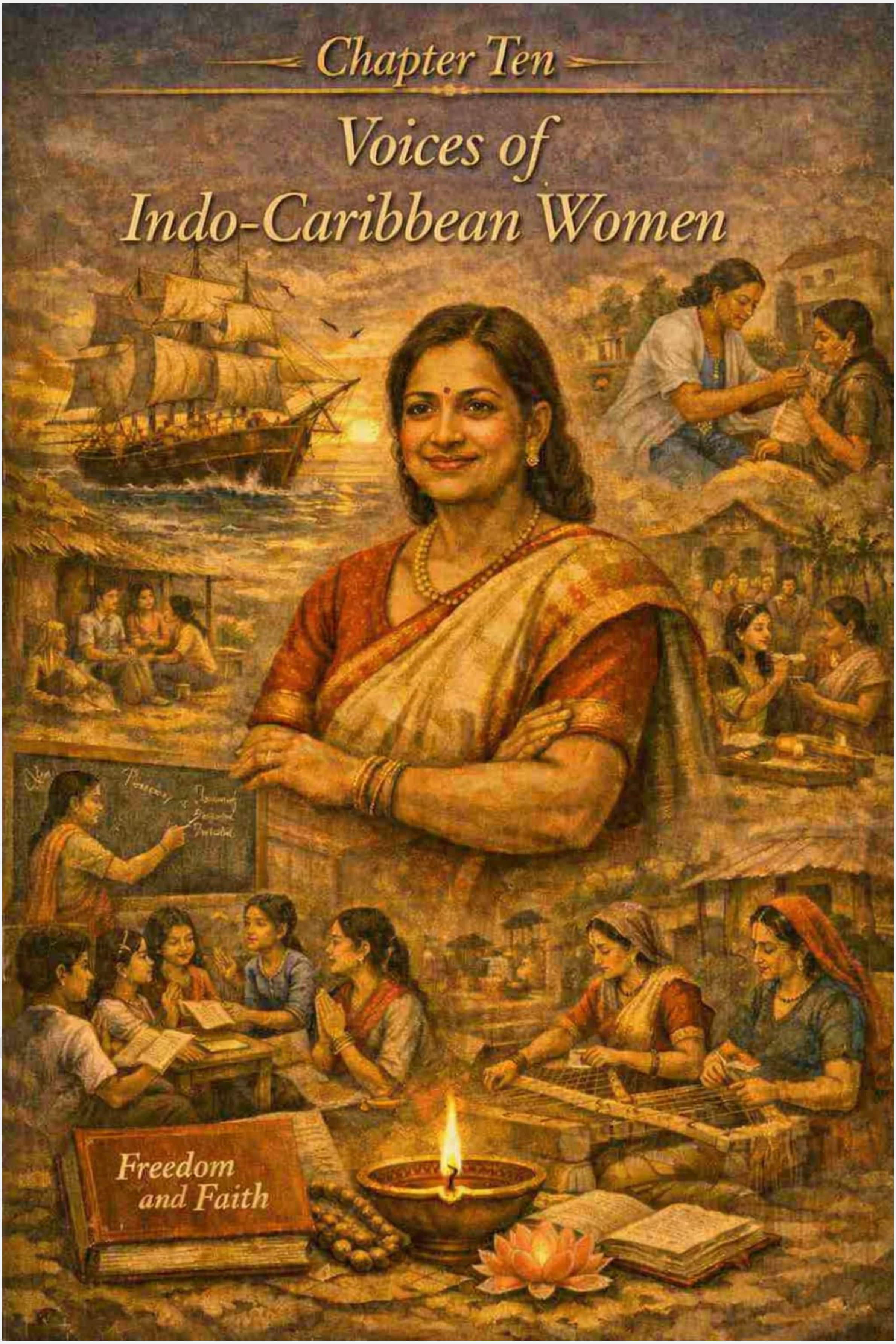
Mahadai’s legacy endured. She gave to society twelve children, each of whom became a valuable member of the community. Every child grew into a productive citizen, creating employment, volunteering for the upliftment of the less privileged, and carrying forward the values instilled in them. Those who moved abroad transplanted the same principles, establishing organizations dedicated to community improvement.

Her children, in turn, gave nearly fifty grandchildren and, by the time Mahadai departed, she had already witnessed the flowering of her lineage. Through her grandchildren and some twenty great-grandchildren, she left behind innumerable gifts of music, service, and citizenship. Her life became a testament to resilience: a woman whose household was not only a family, but a living institution of values, continuity, and hope.

Following the passing of Soondrie and Dwarika, their children transformed their shared grief into a profound living tribute by formalizing the couple’s lifelong values through the establishment of the “Soondrie and Dwarika Community Centre.” Located at Dwarika Avenue, Gandhi Village, Debe, Trinidad and Tobago, the centre serves as a permanent anchor for the principles they held dear. By establishing this non-profit hub, the family has ensured that their parents’ spirit of service continues to empower the region through structured social welfare, holistic healthcare, and youth education initiatives.

More than just a facility, the centre stands as a cornerstone of cultural preservation, safeguarding the rich Indo-Trinidadian heritage they loved for generations to come. Within its walls, there is a tangible sense of continuity, a feeling that Soondrie and Dwarika are still present and available, their guidance and warmth lingering in every act of kindness performed there. Through these tireless efforts, their children have shifted the narrative from one of loss to one of enduring connection, proving that while they have passed, their commitment to the social fabric of Debe remains vibrant, unbroken, and always within reach.

O Divine Presence, source of strength and compassion,
we bow in gratitude for the lives of Soondrie and Dwarika.
Through their love, sacrifice, and unwavering faith,
they built not only a family, but a living temple of values.
May their voices, once lifted in song and prayer,
continue to echo in the hearts of their children, grandchildren,
and generations yet to come.
May the centre that bears their names remain a beacon of service,
a sanctuary of culture and a testament to endurance.
Grant us the wisdom to carry forward their legacy,
to serve with humility, to uplift with kindness,
and to live with the same courage they embodied.
Let their memory be our guiding light,
their blessings our shield,
and their spirit our eternal companion.
Jai Mahadeo


Chapter Ten
Voices of Indo-Caribbean Women
Freedom and Faith

Chapter Ten: Voices of Indo-Caribbean Women

Champa Devi: A Trailblazer of Indo-Caribbean Arts

The following is recounted by Champa Devi interviewed by Bhanu Dwarika in 1985

In the vibrant yet often overlooked history of the Indo-Caribbean community, certain figures stand out not only for their artistry, but for their courage in defying societal norms. One such figure is Champa Devi, born Fatima Rahim in 1923, whose name once glittered across the stages of Trinidad. Her journey from self-taught dancer to cultural pioneer reflects both the resilience of diasporic creativity and the indomitable spirit of women who dared to step into forbidden spaces. To understand her legacy is to understand the struggles and triumphs of an entire generation of Indo-Caribbean women who fought for visibility, dignity, and artistic expression in a world that denied them all three.

Born in Wellington, Trinidad, in 1923, Champa Devi entered a world still shaped by the legacy of Indian indenture. Her father, Fauzdhar Khan, was a tailor by profession, a skilled tradesman who hoped to provide stability for his family. For a few precious years, life was ordinary, perhaps even peaceful. But when Champa was only seven years old, disaster struck: her father's store burned to the ground. The fire consumed not only his livelihood, but also the family's sense of security. Left with few options, Fauzdhar Khan made the difficult decision to relocate to Port of Spain, the bustling capital of Trinidad, where opportunities for work and survival seemed more plentiful.

The move to Port of Spain, however, did not bring the renewal the family had hoped for. Seeking companionship and domestic support, Champa's father remarried. This decision would fundamentally alter the course of Champa's childhood. Her stepmother proved to be cruel and abusive, subjecting the young girl to physical violence that left both visible and invisible scars. Home ceased to be a sanctuary. Instead, Champa's formative years became a fragmented journey of survival, shuttling from her father's house to her mother's care to her grandparents' shelter, never finding the consistent love and protection every child deserves. This early exposure to instability and cruelty could have broken her spirit. Instead, it forged in her a quiet, unshakable resilience that would later define her career.

Growing up in Trinidad, Champa Devi had no access to formal schools of music or dance. In the 1930s and 1940s, classical Indian dance forms like *Bharatanatyam* and *Kathak* were not widely taught in the Caribbean diaspora. Traditionalists looked down upon public performance, particularly for women. Yet Champa found her teacher in an unlikely place: the cinema. Hindi films, which had begun to captivate audiences across the Indian diaspora with their vibrant musical sequences and emotional storytelling, became her window into the culture of a homeland she had never seen.

She recalled that her first inspiration was the film *Bala Joban*. Watching the graceful movements of the actresses on screen, something ignited within her. She would return home after each viewing, her mind replaying every gesture and expression, and practice diligently in whatever space she could find. Step by step, she taught herself to dance. She choreographed her own routines, blending the cinematic vocabulary she absorbed with her own natural intuition for rhythm and storytelling. Through this entirely self-taught artistry, Champa Devi brought to life performances that connected Trinidadians to the culture they had left behind in India, not through academic preservation, but through living, breathing expression.

By the time she entered young adulthood, Champa Devi had transformed herself into a performer of remarkable skill. Her stage presence was magnetic. In her prime, she could be compared to Bollywood icons like Rekha or Sridevi, women who embodied elegance, charisma, and undeniable talent. Audiences were enthralled by her ability to transform cinematic gestures into living dance, bridging continents and generations. When she moved, she told stories: of love and loss, of devotion and defiance, of the beauty of Indian culture preserved across the *Kala Pani*, the dark waters that separated the diaspora from the ancestral homeland.

Champa was not the only female dancer of her era. Alice Jan was another notable presence on the Trinidadian stage, and both women faced similar battles against a society that scorned female performers. Champa was distinguished by her unique enthusiasm for opening the stage to other women. She did not simply want to perform herself; she wanted to pry open the doors so that others could follow. In a time when public presentation of women was considered taboo, when female dancers were ridiculed, catcalled, and subjected to obscenities, this was nothing short of revolutionary.

Champa Devi’s ambition, however brilliant, might have remained unrealized without the unusual and powerful patronage of one of Trinidad’s most formidable figures: Bhadase Sagan Maharaj. Maharaj was a man of many identities, philanthropist, wrestler, politician, and community leader. He was widely respected for both his physical prowess and his financial strength. In the rough-and-tumble world of Trinidadian politics and public life, Bhadase was a no-nonsense force, a man who commanded loyalty and fear in equal measure.

Many who witnessed their interactions believed that Bhadase was deeply enthralled by Champa Devi. Whether his interest was romantic, artistic, or simply born of a desire to support a groundbreaking talent is unclear. What is certain is that his support was transformative. Bhadase maintained a close working relationship with the Americans who controlled military bases in Trinidad during and after World War II. These bases, most notably Fort Reid and Wallerfield, were restricted spaces, off-limits to most locals. But through his alliance with the Americans, Bhadase gained access to their property, including use as performance venues.

For Champa Devi, this access was a golden key. Bhadase’s support gave her the opportunity to perform on stages inside the American bases, spaces that offered protection from the vulgarities and harassment she might have faced in more public venues. The American audiences, far removed from the taboos of Trinidadian society, responded to her art with enthusiasm rather than scorn. In the controlled environment of the military bases, Champa Devi could dance freely, her talent taking center stage without the weight of cultural disapproval pressing down upon her.

A further turning point came in 1943, when Champa met Murli Kirpalani, a prominent businessman in the Indian community of Trinidad. Kirpalani was wealthy, influential, and deeply connected to the cultural aspirations of the diaspora. At the time, he served as the Vice President of the India Club, a prestigious organization dedicated to promoting Indian culture and community welfare. One of his primary responsibilities was raising funds for the India Famine Relief Fund, a cause of immense urgency as millions perished in the Bengal Famine of 1943.

Amidst this humanitarian work, Kirpalani extended a remarkable gesture of kindness to Champa. He allowed her to spend time at his home as a guest, recognizing that she needed a stable and supportive environment. Since he had a maid to assist her, Champa could focus on her art without the burden of domestic chores.

Over time, Champa came to see Kirpalani not merely as a patron, but as her manager, someone who understood her career, protected her interests, and opened doors that would otherwise have remained closed. He ensured that she performed in proper costumes and real jewelry, not the cheap imitations that many traveling performers were forced to wear. This attention to presentation elevated Champa's artistry to new heights. When she took the stage adorned in authentic silk and gold, she commanded not just attention, but respect. Kirpalani's belief in her was so profound that he accompanied her on a trip to Guyana for performances, acting as both patron and protector. At that time, the airfare from Trinidad to Guyana was $60 TT, a considerable sum, equivalent to weeks or even months of wages for an ordinary worker. That Kirpalani was willing to make this investment spoke volumes about his commitment to Champa's career and to the elevation of Indo-Caribbean arts more broadly.

Champa Devi was not only a dancer, but also a singer. Her artistic range extended beyond movement into the realm of vocal music, where she forged lasting collaborations with two of the finest singers of her era: Taran Persad and Ganga Persad. From Ganga Persad himself, there is a letter containing his personal account of their meeting. By his own words, Ganga Persad first met Champa Devi in 1945. The meeting took place at the *Gulshan Bahar* stage show, one of the prominent cultural events of the time. Champa was immediately impressed with his singing, his voice, his phrasing, and his ability to move an audience. Recognizing his talent, she did something that would change the course of his career: she introduced him to her colleagues in the music industry. The famous *Naya Zamana* orchestra, already a well-established name in Trinidadian entertainment, took him on immediately. Thereafter, the main singers of the *Naya Zamana* orchestra were Taran Persad and Ganga Persad. Champa sang with both of them, creating a powerful synergy between her dance and their vocals.

One of the most significant moments in Champa Devi's musical career came with the formal opening of a new institution: Radio Trinidad. The station's launch was hosted by Kamaluddin Mohammed, a respected figure in the Indian community. For this historic occasion, Champa and Ganga Persad sang a duet together. The song they performed was "Mayya Pingala," a traditional composition that showcased both their vocal ranges and their ability to blend their voices in harmonious storytelling. To perform at the inauguration of a national radio station was no small honor. It placed Champa Devi at the intersection of culture, technology, and modernity. Her voice, once heard only by live audiences, now capable of reaching listeners across the entire island.

What made Champa Devi extraordinary was not only her artistry, but the sheer courage required to practice it. Respectable women did not dance in public; to do so was to invite accusations of immorality, to risk one's reputation and one's family's honor. The society that had emerged from indenture was deeply conservative, clinging to old-world values as a shield against the disorienting experience of diaspora.

Champa endured obscenities shouted from audiences. She faced criticism from community leaders who saw her as a threat to traditional gender roles. She was subjected to gossip, to exclusion, and to the casual cruelty of a society that punished women who dared to seek the spotlight. Yet she did not retreat. Her strength lay in her defiance of these societal norms. By stepping onto the stage again and again, she opened doors for women in the arts. She proved that female performers could command respect and admiration. She demonstrated that dance was not a shameful profession, but a legitimate and beautiful form of cultural expression.

Decades later, the glamour of Champa Devi's youth had faded into simplicity. She lived in a modest apartment in Queens, New York, shared with her children and grandchildren. The contrast between her past and present was stark. The woman who had once dazzled American soldiers and Trinidadian elites now lived a quiet life in the diaspora, far from the stages where she once made history.

Like many musicians, dancers, and cricketers of her era, Champa Devi had no pension or benefits to sustain her golden years. The artistic labor that had brought so much joy to audiences had not translated into financial security. There were no royalties, no retirement funds, no official recognition from the governments or cultural institutions that had benefited from her pioneering spirit. She lived modestly, her jewels and costumes long since sold or lost, her name fading from public memory.

Still, those who met her in those later years noted something remarkable: her beauty and grace remained striking, even in her sixties. The hardships of her childhood, the cruelties of her stepmother, the scorn of audiences, the poverty of her old age, none of it had extinguished the light within her. Meeting her was humbling. Champa Devi's legacy is not merely in the dances she performed, nor in the songs she sang, but in the barriers she broke. Her story also serves as a cautionary tale about how we remember, or fail to remember, our cultural pioneers. Champa Devi ended her days in obscurity, unsung by the very society she had helped to transform. How many other Champa Devis have been lost to history? How many women of the Indo-Caribbean diaspora poured their talent and courage into the arts, only to be forgotten because no one thought to record their names?

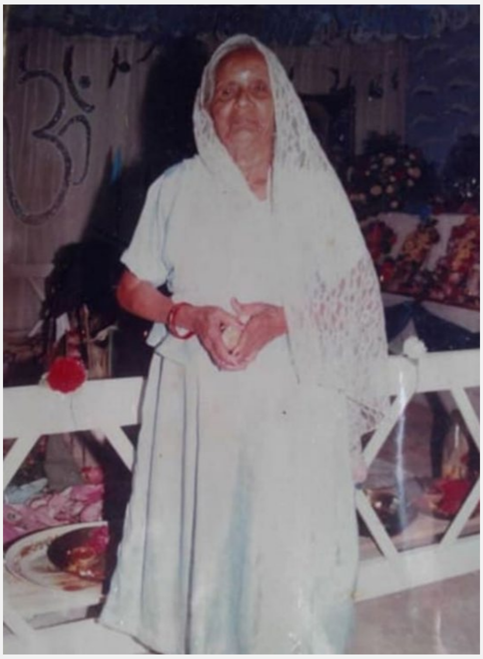
Champa Devi’s story is more than a biography; it is a testament to the resilience of diasporic women who carved space for themselves in hostile cultural climates. Her journey reminds us that art is not only about beauty, but about courage, resistance, and the power to redefine what society deems possible. She danced and sang not for fame or fortune, neither of which she ultimately retained, but because the performance demanded to be given. Because the culture of her ancestors deserved to live. Because the young women watching from the shadows deserved to see someone like them standing in the light.

In the history of Indo-Caribbean arts, her name endures as a beacon for future generations. Let it not be the last such name we rescue from oblivion. Let her story inspire us to seek out the other pioneers, the forgotten artists, the women who dared when daring was dangerous. And let us honor them not only in memory, but in the living practice of the arts they loved, by dancing, by singing, by stepping onto stages both grand and humble, and by refusing to let the world tell us we do not belong there.

Champa Devi, born Fatima Rahim in 1923, once glittered across the stages of Trinidad. She sang “Mayya Pingala” into the microphones of a new nation. She walked the halls of the India Club and the American bases of Fort Reid and Wallerfield. She endured, she created, and she inspired. It is time for her name to glitter once more.

The Silent Guardian: The Legacy of Barka Mai

The below is told by Salina, the great-granddaughter of Barka Mai



The history of the South Asian diaspora in the Caribbean is often told through the lens of labor and logistics, yet the soul of that history resides in the stories of the matriarchs who preserved a culture across the *Kala Pani*. Among these figures, Barka Mai stands as a foundational pillar of Gandhi Village in Trinidad and Tobago, representing the resilience, spiritual depth, and communal strength of the indentured Indian community.

The term "Barka Mai" itself, a blend of Bhojpuri and Awadhi influences meaning "Elder Mother," signifies more than a biological role; it denotes a position of leadership and ancestral wisdom. For the families who settled in Gandhi Village, she was the living link between the ancestral plains of India and the new soil of the Caribbean.

Lalia Bhabuni Ramsawak came from India. At the age of eight, her family returned to India, leaving her behind in Trinidad. No one really knows why this came about.

She was later married to Ramsawak, the brother of Chinee Roopnarine. They had eight children, seven boys and one girl. Unfortunately, her husband, Ramsawak, passed away after surgery, leaving her with the responsibility of caring for their young children, some as young as four and five. However, Chinee and his sister helped nurture them.

As a mother of eight children, she understood intimately the weight of responsibility, the art of balancing scarce resources, and the power of patience born from daily sacrifice. By providing guidance and resolving conflicts, she helped foster a sense of unity and mutual support in her large extended family.

She ensured that the spiritual values and religious practices of her ancestors remained paramount. This devotion provided a sense of sacred purpose and historical belonging, anchoring her family to their roots while they navigated their new lives in Trinidad and Tobago.

The story of Barka Mai is also one of profound sacrifice. Her life reflects the transition from a laborer to a matriarch of a free village. In the early days of Gandhi Village, women like her navigated a complex landscape of colonial expectations and traditional values. Her ability to establish a home that felt like “India in the West” allowed future generations to thrive without losing their sense of origin.

Barka Mai remains a symbol of the unconquerable spirit of the Caribbean diaspora. To study her life is to understand the true cost and the immense beauty of cultural survival.

The Midwives of the Village

Most accounts of Gandhi Village begin with cane, the endless fields, the overseers, the burden of indenture. That history is undeniable. Yet the survival of the settlement rested not only on crops, but on the women who carried knowledge in their hands: the midwives.

Their names were rarely written down. Plantation ledgers recorded sugar yields and labor hours, but the women who delivered every child in the village remained absent from official memory. Still, their presence was everywhere.

When the first Indians crossed the *Kala Pani*, the black water that severed them from familiar worlds, no hospitals awaited them. The nearest hospital was in San Fernando, far away and reserved for emergencies. Births unfolded on hut floors, with a *dai* kneeling in the dust. She brought only what she carried in her mind: herbs to stop bleeding, massages to ease pain, rituals that transformed fear into something sacred.

A good midwife was often considered better than a doctor. These women could turn a breech baby with their hands alone, brew fever grass and ginger to soothe pain, prepare *halwa* to bring in milk, and perform the *chathi*, the rigorous postnatal massage that healed bodies in ways modern medicine still struggles to explain.

Three names echo through village memory: Phoolbasia and Kalbassia, sisters who worked side by side for years, and the "Bhikanee Lady," remembered only by her community name. The details blur, but the presence endures.

One story illustrates their skill. In 1944, Soondrie went into labor with twins. The first child arrived safely. The second was breech, feet first. Even in modern hospitals, such a birth carries risk. Yet the *dai* remained calm, guiding the mother with steady words and careful hands. The baby was delivered safely, both children survived, and the mother endured without harm. Outside the village, no one heard of it. For the midwives, it was simply another day.

Such stories were routine. These women managed emergencies in conditions that would overwhelm trained physicians, often without pay or recognition, receiving only a child named in their honor or a plate of food offered in old age.

By the 1950s and 1960s, hospitals reached deeper into the countryside. District nurses arrived in white uniforms with sterilized instruments. Younger mothers began to see home births as backward, something to leave behind with indenture. Modern care saved lives, yet something was lost. The *chathi* faded, herbal knowledge died with the elders, and rituals around the first six days slipped into memory.

Today, the midwives of Gandhi Village are gone. Their names are not etched on plaques; no monument honors them. Yet at weddings or funerals, someone will still say, “Our grandmother used to catch babies.” Silence follows, heavy with recognition. For everyone knows what that meant: these women ensured that even after the *Kala Pani*, after ships and bondage and alienation, life continued. Their hands were the first to touch a generation. And that was everything.

From Ramnaggr To Gandhi Village

Mahadai Das: A Poetess of Her People

Mahadai Das was born in 1954 in Eccles, East Bank Demerara, Guyana, and is remembered as one of the pioneering Indo-Caribbean women poets whose voice helped shape Guyanese and Caribbean literature. From her school years at Bishop's High School in Georgetown, she began writing poetry that reflected both her sensitivity to language and her awareness of social realities. Her academic journey took her from the University of Guyana, where she earned a degree in Philosophy, to Columbia University in New York for her master's studies, and later to the University of Chicago for doctoral work. Yet her life was marked by hardship: after her mother's death in 1971, she assumed responsibility for raising nine siblings, a role that profoundly shaped her resilience and sense of duty.

Das was not only a poet but also an activist and cultural worker. In 1976 she volunteered in the Guyana National Service, a program designed to address youth unemployment, and became a member of the Messenger Group, which promoted Indo-Guyanese art forms at a time when they were marginalized. Her political engagement extended to the Working People's Alliance, where she opposed corruption, racism, and authoritarianism. Beyond activism, she was a dancer, actress, teacher, and even crowned *Ms. Dewali* in 1971, reflecting her multifaceted personality and commitment to cultural expression.

Her Most Famous Literary Contributions

Among the first Indo-Caribbean women to publish poetry addressing **ethnic and gender issues**.

Major works:

- *I Want to Be a Poetess of My People* (1977) - celebrated Guyanese identity and independence.
- *My Finer Steel Will Grow* (1982) - expressed disillusionment with corruption and inequality.
- *Bones* (1988) - explored Indo-Caribbean identity in the U.S. and cultural heritage.
- *A Leaf in His Ear* (2003) - posthumous collection preserving her voice.

The poetry of Mahadai Das is distinguished by its bold engagement with identity, justice, and belonging. At its core, her work affirms Indo-Caribbean heritage, resisting both colonial and postcolonial exclusion, and insisting on the dignity of a community often marginalized in Caribbean narratives. She was equally uncompromising in her critique of gender inequality, exposing the contradiction of men who fought for racial justice yet denied women equality within their own ranks. Her poems gave voice to the struggles of the working class, highlighting the harsh realities of poor labor conditions and exploitation across the Caribbean. Nationalism was another powerful current in her writing, as she called for independence from colonial powers and envisioned a new sense of unity for the region. Alongside these collective concerns, Das explored the intimate tension between cultural heritage and modern urban life, reflecting the personal search for identity in a rapidly changing world. Together, these themes made her poetry both a mirror of her society and a challenge to its injustices.

Tragically, Mahadai Das's brilliant career was cut short by illness during her doctoral studies in Chicago. Forced to abandon her academic pursuits, she returned to Guyana, withdrew from public life, and published little thereafter. The silence that followed was as heartbreaking as it was undeserved, for hers was a voice that had only begun to reach its full resonance. On April 3, 2003, she passed away in Barbados at the age of 48, leaving behind not only unfinished dreams but also a body of work that continues to echo across the Caribbean. Her passing cast a long shadow over Guyanese letters a silence that felt like the dimming of a flame that had once burned fiercely against injustice and despair. The world lost not merely a poet but a conscience, a spirit whose words had carried the ache of generations and the hope of renewal. In the quiet after her death, her poetry became her pulse, each line a heartbeat that refused to fade.

Her legacy endures as that of a trailblazer who carved space for Indo-Caribbean women in literature, confronting colonial legacies and patriarchal structures with courage and clarity.

THE DAY OF REVOLUTION BY MAHADAI DAS

I dreamt that the day of revolution would come
that thousands would storm the city streets
screaming for justice.

Who can hold back the climbing sun in the sky?
Children hate the trapped darkness of the night.
I heard a cry echo the wind...
Soon the crowd advanced and raised
a further cry.

Like full-blown trees
at their maturing, the schools
surrendered their eager fruits. Then
the Bastille storm advanced upon
the scampering rats

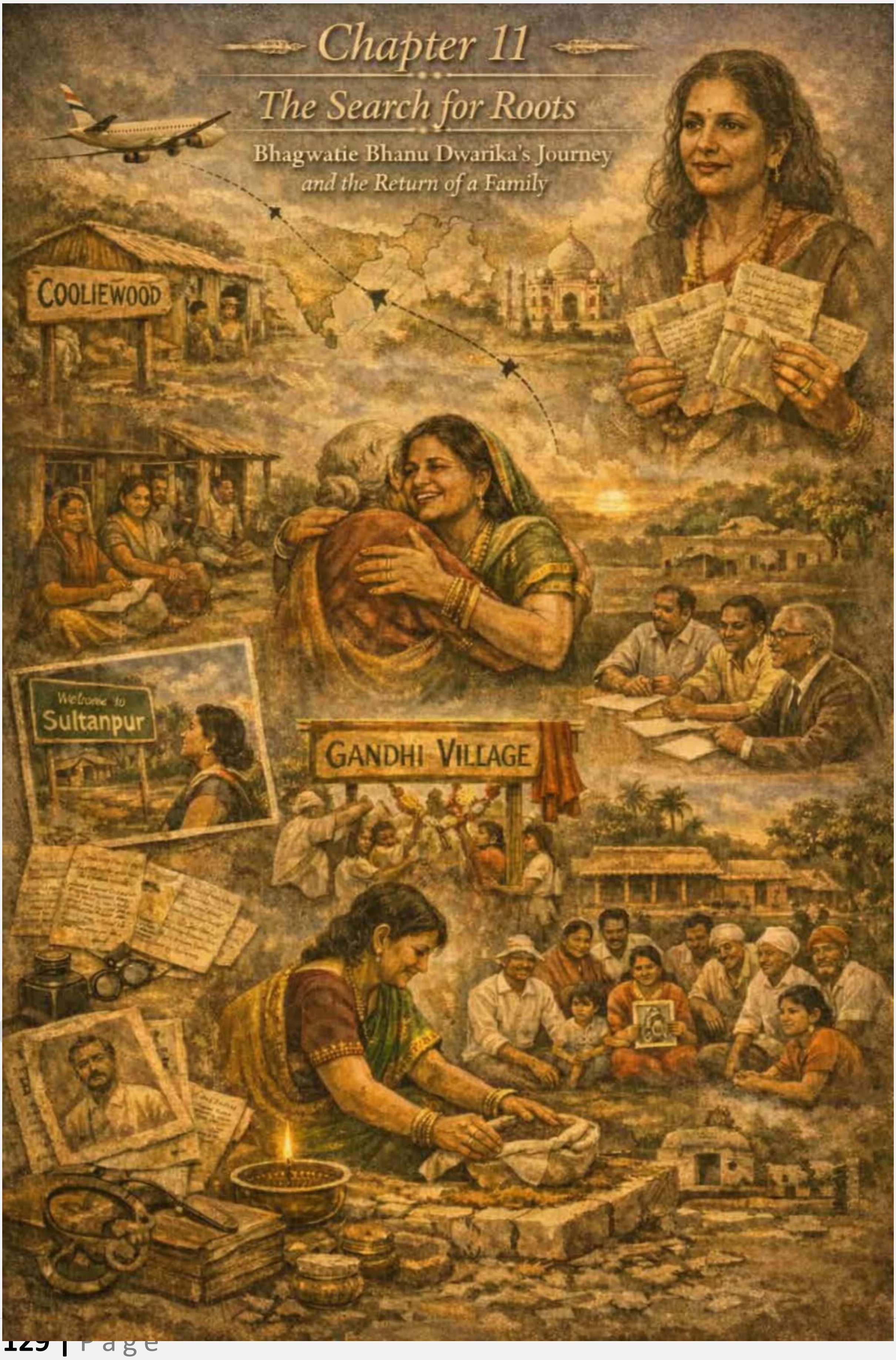
like an irrevocable flood,
like an irrevocable coming of dawn.

Ordered to march, the soldiers, my brothers, came
bearing in the stems of their guns, flowers
for the children of freedom's
new regiment.

The counterfeit general, left wingless
in the hostile air, clothed in the tarnished
brooches of his vanity, unprepared
for the sudden speech of freedom,
continued to spin his illusions
with the rotten yarn of his life.

Last night
I dreamed that the day of revolution would come.

SOURCE: Poem from her collection My Finer Steel Will Grow


Chapter 11
The Search for Roots
Bhagwatie Bhanu Dwarika's Journey
and the Return of a Family
COOLIEWOOD
Welcome to
Sultanpur
GANDHI VILLAGE

Chapter Eleven: The Search for Roots

Bhagwatie Bhanu Dwarika’s Journey and the Return of a Family

History does not merely repeat itself; at times, it gathers scattered destinies and brings them face to face, where memory dissolves into both tears and quiet joy. When Ramadhin Ramsahai stepped aboard the ship *RHONI* from Calcutta in 1898, he carried little more than hope and a small bundle of soil, yet within that humble act lay an unspoken vow. He could not have known that, a century later, his descendants would retrace that journey, not as exiles, but as seekers, returning to repay a debt owed to memory itself.

This is not the story of a planned return, but of a longing deep, persistent, and unyielding. It is the story of Bhagwatie Bhanu Dwarika, who did not set out as a traveler, but as one compelled by an inner calling to rediscover what time had concealed.

The First Journey - 1982

A hundred years after Ramadhin Ramsahai left India, Bhagwatie set foot upon its soil in search of his beginnings.

All she carried was a name, Sultanpur, written once upon an envelope, a faint trace left behind by history. Yet even that was enough. With hope as her compass, she journeyed to a land both unknown and intimately her own.

The village was unprepared for her arrival. She was, to them, a stranger from across the seas, yet when her purpose became known, she was received not as an outsider, but as a returning daughter. Garlands were placed around her neck, and a gathering was arranged beneath a modest canopy. The villagers came forward, not merely to see her, but to connect, to bridge a century of absence with questions and shared wonder.

What had become of Ramadhin Ramsahai's lineage? How had they survived in a distant land? What stories had endured?

She answered what she could. In return, she received not just gifts, coins, and simple sweets, but something far more profound: recognition.

The sweets, hard, brown, and familiar, were identical to those she had known since childhood in Trinidad. In that moment, she realized that memory travels in ways history cannot record. The taste of her grandmother's kitchen had crossed the ocean, preserved not in books, but in the hands and hearts of those who remembered.

Though she found no definitive answers on that first journey, she returned with something greater than certainty: a quiet conviction that the roots were still alive, waiting patiently to be rediscovered.

And she carried back a single coin, a fragment of belonging.

The Years Between: A Quiet Devotion

The years that followed were not marked by dramatic revelations, but by steady, determined effort. Without intending to, Bhagwatie had become the custodian of her family's search.

She came to understand that rediscovering one's origins required more than travel; it demanded patience, research, and faith in fragments. She sought the help of genealogists and historians, including Shamshu Deen, whose meticulous work would later illuminate the paths of many *Girmitiya* descendants.

In Trinidad, she listened to elders, to stories, to echoes of a past that lingered in memory. She gathered photographs, traced maps, and pieced together narratives that had survived only through oral tradition.

What she discovered was this: her longing was not hers alone.

In the 1980s, the history of the *Girmitiya* people remained largely unrecorded, a story pushed to the margins, told in fragments, often by others. Determined to change this, she created a television segment in 1985 portraying the journey from India to the Caribbean. It was modest in scale, yet profound in impact.

When it aired, letters began to arrive from across Trinidad and beyond. They carried the same yearning, the same unanswered questions. Others, too, were searching.

She had never been alone.

The Second Journey - 2007

Bhanu Dwarika with her elder brother, Ramnarace Dwarika

When Bhagwatie returned to India in 2007, she did not return alone. Her children accompanied her, transforming a personal quest into a shared legacy.

Armed now with translated letters, gathered stories, and years of quiet preparation, she retraced her steps, this time with clarity and purpose. From Delhi to Allahabad and onward to the village, each mile seemed to draw her closer, not just to a place, but to a truth long deferred.

This time, the search bore fruit.

Guided by local support, including Arvind Kumar Yadav, they explored records, met village elders, and reconstructed the past through both documentation and memory. And in the most unexpected moments, over a simple meal of *dal*, rice, and okra, the past revealed itself.

The taste was unmistakable. It was the same as in Trinidad. Unchanged.

In that instant, she understood: the connection had never been broken. It had lived quietly, carried across oceans through tradition, memory, and the resilience of those who refused to forget.

In February 2007, Bhanu's elder brother Ramnarace, also visited the village of Ramnagar. The village welcomed him with garlands, rituals, and reverence. Yet the harder task lay ahead: finding family. After generations of silence, certainty was fragile. Panchayats were held, elders recalled lineage, and slowly, truth emerged. He found them. Our family. And with that discovery came another revelation: Ramadhin had three brothers. A quarrel over land had divided them long before he left India. For more than a century, the families lived apart, unaware of each other's fate.

Ramnarace did what history had failed to do. He travelled to the settlement where the other family members lived. They welcomed him with sweet rice, the same dish we cherished in Trinidad. In that moment, distance dissolved. The families reunited. What had been broken for over a hundred years was restored in a single day.

Ramnarace is the most active storyteller in the family. He wove together memories and histories for the younger generations, ensuring that the family's legacy endured. Locating an ancestral link in Ramnagar could not have been possible without his input.

The Thread That Endures

There is a quiet poetry in the names that run through the lineage: Ramadhin, Ramawad, Dwarika. Each name carries within it a remembrance, a refusal to sever ties with origin.

Names, like memory, endure.

Stories endure.

Even the simplest things, a taste, a word, a fragment of song, become vessels of continuity.

The Reunion: When Time Yielded to Blood

In Ramnagar, the descendants of Ramadhin Ramsahai's family still lived. When both sides compared their genealogies, the past aligned with remarkable clarity. What had once been a story fractured by distance now stood whole.

For the villagers, Ramadhin had been the brother who disappeared. For Bhagwatie, he was the ancestor whose journey had shaped generations.

The reunion was not merely emotional; it was restorative.

Gifts were exchanged, but more importantly, so was belonging. From India, she carried back soil and water from the Ganga to place upon the grave of her ancestors in Trinidad, a symbolic act that completed a journey begun over a century earlier.

A Home Rebuilt, A Bridge Restored

The discovery of Ramnagar was not an end, but a beginning. Bhagwatie returned repeatedly, nurturing the connection she had uncovered.

She built a modest home there, a single room, later expanded with simple improvements. It was not an act of possession, but of presence, a quiet declaration that the bond between past and present would not fade again.

That house still stands, not as a monument, but as a testament.

A Story That Lit a Path

Bhagwatie's journey soon reached beyond the boundaries of her own family. It drew attention from the media and inspired countless others across the Caribbean to begin their own searches.

What she had uncovered was not just a lineage, but a possibility.

Her story gave rise to a movement, a reawakening of identity among those whose histories had long been obscured. It affirmed a simple truth: roots do not disappear; they wait.

The Fire Within

Bhagwatie has never claimed ownership of this story. Yet it is undeniable that the first spark was hers.

She was the one who refused to let the letters remain unread. The one who took the first uncertain step in 1982. The one who preserved, recorded, and shared what others had forgotten.

That longing, before it belonged to a family or a people, belonged to her.

For Those Who Still Seek

Her journey speaks quietly to all those who continue to search.

The path may be uncertain. The records incomplete. The memories fragmented. Yet the longing itself is a guide, an inner compass that leads, slowly but surely, toward truth.

One day, perhaps, others too will sit in a distant village, tasting something strangely familiar, and understand:

They were never truly lost.

Epilogue: The Return Fulfilled

The return to Ramnagar was not a single moment, but a gradual unfolding, a story written across decades. The unread letters have found their voice. The forgotten village now holds a home. The severed thread has been tied once more.

Other members of the family, including fourth- and fifth-generation relatives who visited Ramnagar include:

- Sita Abdool - great-granddaughter of Ramadhin
- Seunarine (Vishnu) Dwarika - great-grandson of Ramadhin
- Chanerdaye Ramdhanie - great-granddaughter of Ramadhin
- Suchie (Mattie) Poonai - great-granddaughter of Ramadhin
- Hollis Poonai - great-grandson-in-law of Ramadhin
- Ramona Ramdath - great-granddaughter of Ramadhin
- Divya Ramdath - great-great-granddaughter of Ramadhin
- Indra Roopnarine - great-great-granddaughter of Ramadhin

Perhaps, the fulfillment of a silent dream carried by every soul aboard the *RHONI* in 1898 was that one day, their descendants would return and the path home would be found again.

A New Liberty, A New Dance

Bhagwatie Bhanu Dwarika felt, with her firstborn, a certain liberty to pass on all that her ancestors had entrusted to her. In the cultural mosaic of New York, every opportunity awaited the migrant, opportunities unimaginable for those who once crossed the *Kala Pani*. What was once burdened by stigma had become a mark of accomplishment, a testament to new soil embraced. Indian classical dance, absent in Trinidad, flourished here alongside ballet, jazz, and tap, each readily accessible.

In Trinidad, Bhanu had been denied the chance to study dance, bound by the cultural beliefs of her household. For women, even of the third generation, appearing on stage was deemed undignified. That was the era of Champa Devi, who defied such taboos. In this new space, however, the next generation could embrace dance not as scandal, but as skill; not as shame, but as art.

Her daughter Sita, in her journey, studied *Bharatanatyam*, *Kuchipudi*, ballet, jazz, and tap, her steps carrying forward the legacy once restrained, now expanded into freedom. In Sita's movement, Bhanu saw Ramadhin's journey complete: not only in land reclaimed, but in art embraced without fear.

Return to Calcutta

The family traveled to Kolkata, once Calcutta, and stood on the banks from which Ramadhin had sailed. One hundred and twenty-five years later, they reversed his journey. No longer the dreaded *Kala Pani*. No three-month voyage in a crowded ship. Only hours in the comfort of a plane.

An invitation to celebrate carried them back. How different the experience was. Sita ordered *papadi chaat* as they sat in a newly built restaurant beside the monument that now honors the blood and sacrifice of those trailblazers who had the stamina and courage to leave their homeland so long ago.

It was Sita's marriage celebration that brought them to Kolkata, binding past and present in a circle of departure and return.

Honoring the Sacrifice: A Personal Perspective on the Significance of the Kolkata Memorial

The following article was originally printed in India Empire magazine in 2011

FROM RAMNAGAR TO GANDHI VILLAGE

By Bhagwatie Bhanu Dwarika

Co-Chair, Asian Heritage Committee, District Council 37, and GOPIO Life Member

The significance of a monument that honors the sacrifice of the unsung, heroic pioneers of the Indian diaspora cannot be fully realized without a glimpse into the heart of their experience and the residual fragrance of the indelibly printed memories they shared with their descendants.

There is still a yearning among many Indians of the diaspora to fill the void created by the indenture ships, that severe fracture in the continuity of the social life of the descendants of those who ventured out of the motherland, Mother India, into unknown and distant territories. What is the emotional connection with India? What would this tangible fixture of recognition mean to the Indian child in Trinidad, Guyana, Suriname, Jamaica, Fiji, or Mauritius, who carries in the memory of every cell a deep connection to India?

The descendants of the indentured workers, even as they continue to influence and be influenced by the milieu wherever they have found themselves, continue to maintain that common core of traditions that can be likened to a common denominator among all Indians. In fact, in some instances, the Indians of the diaspora have so jealously guarded their traditions, which they see as an integral part of their identity, especially in the arts, that while some of these forms have been lost in India, they persist in the diaspora. It is impossible to separate the individual from his or her culture, which, though dynamic and changing all the time, maintains a core component upon which variations are added in a layered formation influenced by geographic as well as sociological acculturation.

It was only in the late seventies and early eighties that some literature began circulating regarding the journey from India to the Caribbean and the Indo-Caribbean experience. There was The Caribbean Review in Canada with Frank Birbalsingh. Dr. Brinsley Samaroo started writing and publishing in Trinidad, and Hansib Publications in London, with David Dabydeen and his colleagues, became more active. A History of Indians in Guyana, written by Dwarkanath, was one of the early books on this subject as it related to Guyana, yet it was little circulated, scarcely known, and certainly could not be found in bookstores.

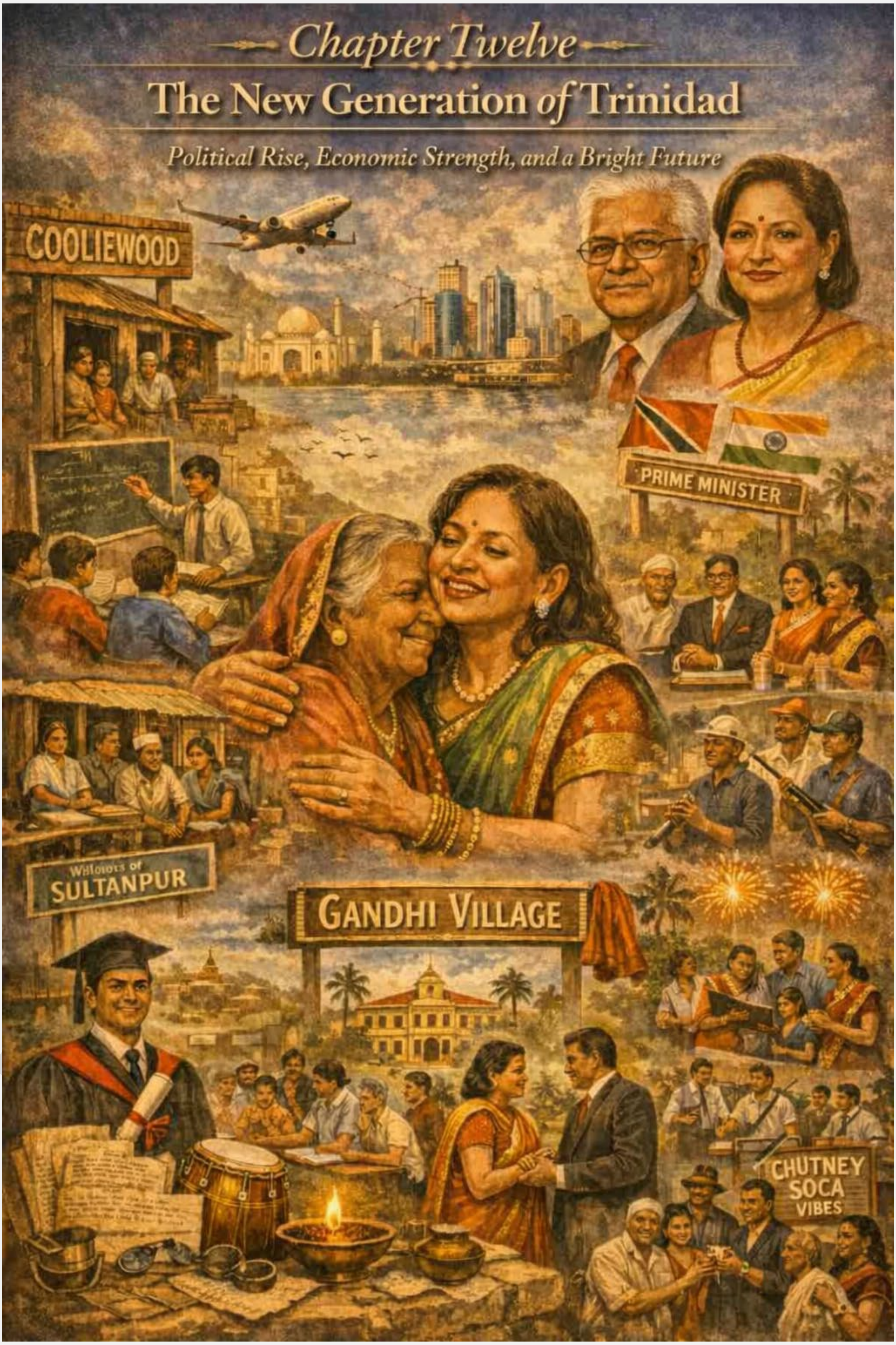
A complete library to conduct research on this subject still does not exist anywhere in the world. The Mahatma Gandhi Institute in Mauritius has some precious records. The India Library in London also has some records. Guyana has a historic collection that pertains to its own population. Trinidad has a small museum and a monument. Hyderabad, again, has some records. But nowhere on the planet is there one complete storehouse for thorough research and understanding. The creation of such a storehouse is long overdue and will unquestionably have long- and far-reaching historic value.

Validation, recognition, gratitude, solidarity, and appreciation are just a few of the connections I make when I think of a monument honoring the indentured worker who left India nearly 200 years ago for work in what we call today the Indian diaspora. The meaning of India's collaboration with her distant sons and daughters, descendants of the indentured laborers, in creating a monument, a permanent declaration of the worthiness of these precious pioneers, cannot be fully processed if it is not placed in the sentimental context of the experience of these families.

I recall my grandfather, Ramawad Ramadhin, at sunset, dressed in a dhoti and a white, short-sleeved cotton T-shirt, with a separate cotton towel in his hand, his angosha, to shoo the mosquitoes away, gathering around his grandchildren for kheesa time. He told us short stories from the Ramayana, stories his father told him about life in India, and little anecdotes about Indian customs and values. I listened and drew an imaginary canvas of the shapes, figures, colors, aromas, and scenes that were so different from the shapes, colors, and scenes I actually saw years later when I took my first trip to India.

The aromas were less fragrant, even pungent, but the poetry was powerful. An unforgettable moment for me was being awakened early one morning while I was taking an overnight train journey. The melodious voice approaching from the other end of the train carriage finally stood in front of me as a broken, dilapidated canvas. That beautiful voice, befitting of a stately prince, was encased in the shabby, dirty rags of a blind beggar led by a young, out-of-this-world beautiful six-year-old girl, also in dirty, shabby rags.

That was my first trip to India, my first attempt, with a few letters in my hand, to find my long-lost family.


Chapter Twelve
The New Generation of Trinidad
Political Rise, Economic Strength, and a Bright Future
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GANDHI VILLAGE
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Chapter Twelve: The New Generation of Trinidad

Political Rise, Economic Strength and a Bright Future

In 1898, when Ramadhin Ramsahai stepped onto the shores of Trinidad, he carried nothing but the strength of his arms for labor and the memory of his homeland in his heart. Yet his third and fourth generations proved that they were not destined merely to sweat in sugarcane fields, but to reshape the destiny of the island itself. By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the rise of Trinidad's Indians in economic and political spheres had become one of history's notable examples of migrant success.

Educational Revolution: From Fields to Halls of Learning

Elders like Ramadhin Ramsahai soon realized that the path to freedom for their children lay through education. They saved from their meager wages to send their children to schools and colleges. Canadian missionary schools in Trinidad and, later, Hindu schools established under the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha (*SDMS*) played a pivotal role in this transformation.

Today, Ramadhin's descendants are doctors, engineers, lawyers, and scientists, helping to shape Trinidad's economy. The children of Gandhi Village, once walking barefoot to school, now serve as CEOs in Port of Spain's major business hubs. Economic stability has granted them not only respect in Trinidad, but also recognition on the international stage.

Political Ascent: From *Girmitiyas* to Prime Ministers

The political rise of Indians in Trinidad was the result of long struggle. Initially excluded from political processes, they gradually gained influence as their economic power grew. The pinnacle of this journey came in 1995, when Basdeo Panday, himself the grandson of an indentured laborer, was elected Trinidad and Tobago's first Prime Minister of Indian origin.

This was not just a political victory, but the triumph of all the *Jahaji* ship brothers once derisively called "Coolies." Later, Kamla Persad-Bissessar made history as the nation's first female Prime Minister, also rooted in the same heritage. Their leadership proved that Ramadhin Ramsahai's descendants had become heirs of Trinidad's soil and architects of its policies.

Economic Stability and Success in Diverse Sectors

Today, the Indian community holds a vital share in Trinidad's economy. Its presence is strong in petroleum, gas, agriculture, and retail industries. Those who once wielded sickles to cut cane now own advanced machinery and technology. Regions like Gandhi Village and Debe are no longer mere villages, but thriving centers of economic activity. Through hard work and business acumen, they have achieved a stature unmatched in the Caribbean.

Cultural Heritage Meets Modernity

While advancing materially, the younger generation also gave new life to its culture. Chutney soca music is a prime example, blending traditional Indian folk melodies with Caribbean rhythms. The legacy of Soondrie Dwarika has been carried into the digital age. Today's youth proudly embrace their roots, presenting their Indo-Trinidadian identity with confidence on international platforms.

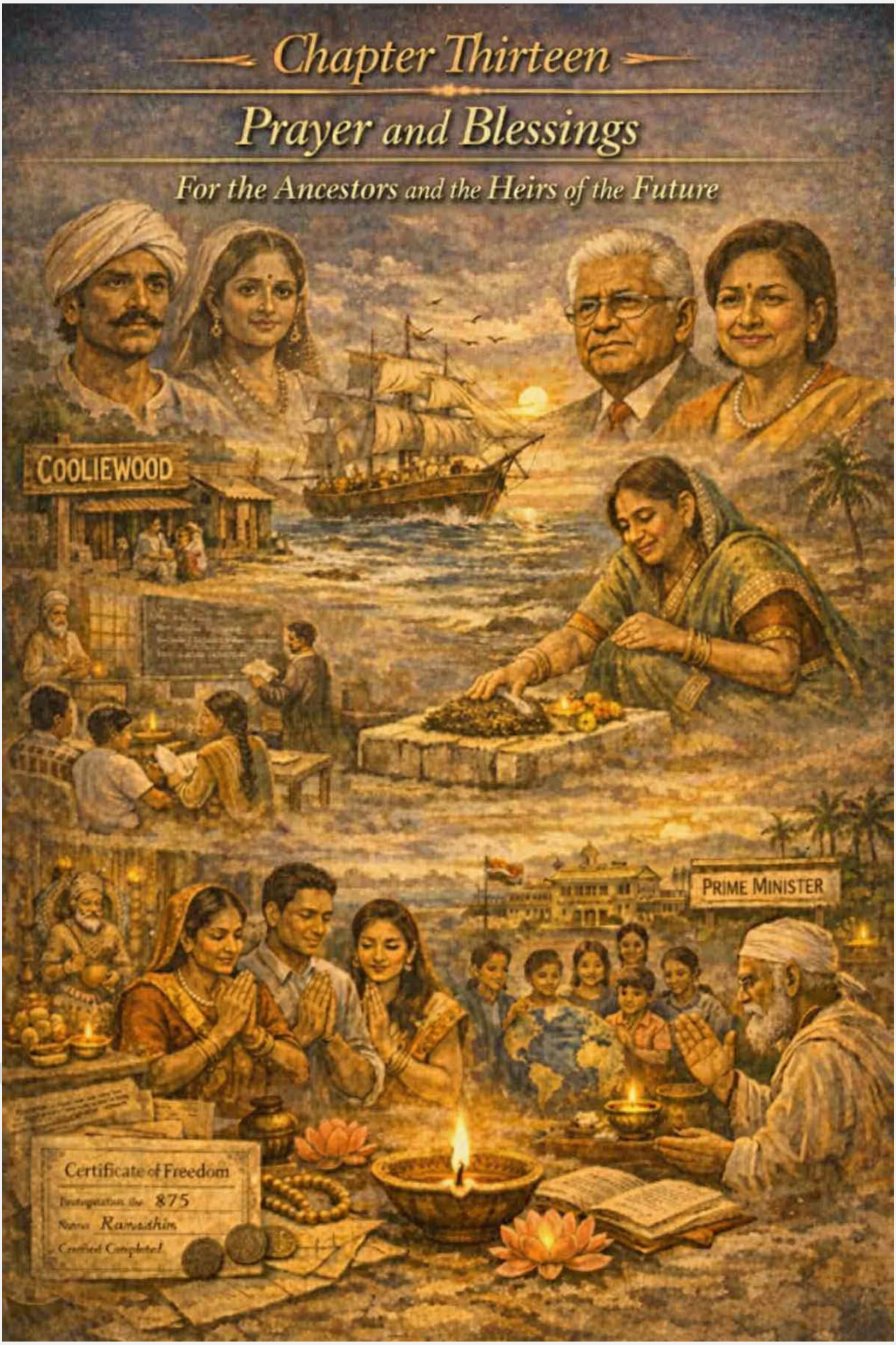
Religious festivals such as Diwali and Eid have become national celebrations in Trinidad, drawing participation from people of all colors and races. This social harmony extends Ramadhin Ramsahai's philosophy of erasing divisions during the oceanic journey.

Marching Toward the Future

The Indian community of Trinidad now stands at a crossroads where horizons stretch endlessly before it. It serves not only its nation, but also forms part of a global diaspora bridging India and the Caribbean. Bhagwatie Bhanu Dwarika's journey back to Ramnagar in 2007 symbolized that this generation no longer fears its past, but instead discovers it and transforms it into strength.

The sweat of the 147,000 Indians who crossed the *Kala Pani* was not wasted. Their toil gave birth to a nation that proved that, if one carries the memory of one's soil and the spirit of labor, a homeland can be built anywhere in the world. The seed Ramadhin Ramsahai planted has now grown into a towering tree, its branches touching the sky while its roots remain firmly connected to Ramnagar in Allahabad. The future belongs to them because they have turned their past into their power.

From Ramnaggr To Gandhi Village


Chapter Thirteen
Prayer and Blessings
For the Ancestors and the Heirs of the Future
COOLIEWOOD
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Chapter Thirteen: Prayer and Blessings for the Ancestors and the Heirs of the Future

The conclusion of any great story is not written merely in words, but in the emotions and prayers preserved in hearts across generations. The journey *From Ramnagar to Gandhi Village* was not just a geographical migration; it was the tale of a human spirit that knows how to survive even after being severed from its roots. The soil Ramadhin Ramsahai carried in his bundle in 1898 has today spread its fragrance across the entire island of Trinidad. In this final chapter, we pay tribute to all those souls who lit the lamps of their lives amid the waves of the ocean and the fields of sugarcane.

Shanti Path for the Travelers of the Past

The first part of our prayer is dedicated to the thousands of nameless travelers who departed from the ports of Calcutta and Madras but never reached their destination: the mothers who boarded ships like the *RHONI* to save their children from hunger, the young men who left to support their aging parents, and all those who fell victim to disease and the merciless waves of the sea, buried without shroud or grave.

According to Indian tradition, a soul does not find peace until its *antim sanskar* (final rites) is performed with earth and by the hands of loved ones. But for these *Jahaji* ship brothers, the ocean itself became their final resting place. Today, we recite the *Shanti Path* in the light of Vedic mantras for all those souls:

Om purnamadah purnamidam
Purnat purnamudachyate
Purnasya purnamadaya
Purnamevavashishyate
Om!

Meaning:
That is whole, this is whole.
From the whole, the whole emerges.
If the whole is taken from the whole,
still the whole remains.
Om! Peace, peace, peace.

O Lord, grant eternal peace and tranquility to all those souls who were denied it in their final journey. Keep their sacrifices alive in the pages of history, for it was their blood and sweat that laid the foundation of a new nation.

Honoring the Legacy of Ramadhin and Sughari

The second part of our prayer is for ancestors like Ramadhin Ramsahai and Sughari, who first set foot on Trinidad's soil and, despite immense hardships, never compromised their culture, their faith, or their dignity. They proved that chains may imprison the body, but they cannot silence the verses of the *Ramayana* or the chants of the *Hanuman Chalisa*.

Even in the cramped and dark barracks, these elders instilled values (*sanskar*) in their children that shaped them into great people. Whether it was Soondrie Dwarika's voice or Bhagwatie Bhanu Dwarika's search for roots, all are fruits of the seed Ramadhin planted in 1898. We pray that the blessings (*ashirvaad*) of these elders forever shelter their descendants, guiding them along the path of labor and sacrifice.

A Prayer of Guidance and Light for the New Generation

The third and most important part of our prayer is for Trinidad's new generation, now making its mark globally in IT, politics, medicine, and the arts. This is the generation unafraid of being called "Coolie," for it has transformed the word into a badge of honor through its toil.

For them, our prayer is the distilled wisdom of the *Upanishads*:

Om Asato-Maa Sad-Gamaya
Tamaso-Maa Jyotir-Gamaya

Mrityor-Maa Amritam Gamaya
Om Shaantih Shaantih Shaantihi

Meaning:
Asato-maa sad-gamaya: Lead me from the unreal, or untruth, to the real, or truth.
Tamaso-maa jyotir-gamaya: Lead me from darkness, or ignorance, to light, or spiritual knowledge.
Mrityor-maa amritam gamaya: Lead me from death to immortality.
Om Shaantih...: Om, peace, peace, peace.

"O Lord, take us from lies to truth, from ignorance to knowledge, and from mortality to eternity."

We pray that Trinidad's new generation strengthens its spiritual roots alongside material progress. Wherever they go, from Port of Spain to New York and London, may the soil of Gandhi Village, carried by Ramadhin Ramsahai, beat within their hearts. May they preserve their language, music, and traditions, not letting them be swept away by the storm of modernity, but reshaping them to present proudly before the world.

Message for the Future: One Global Family

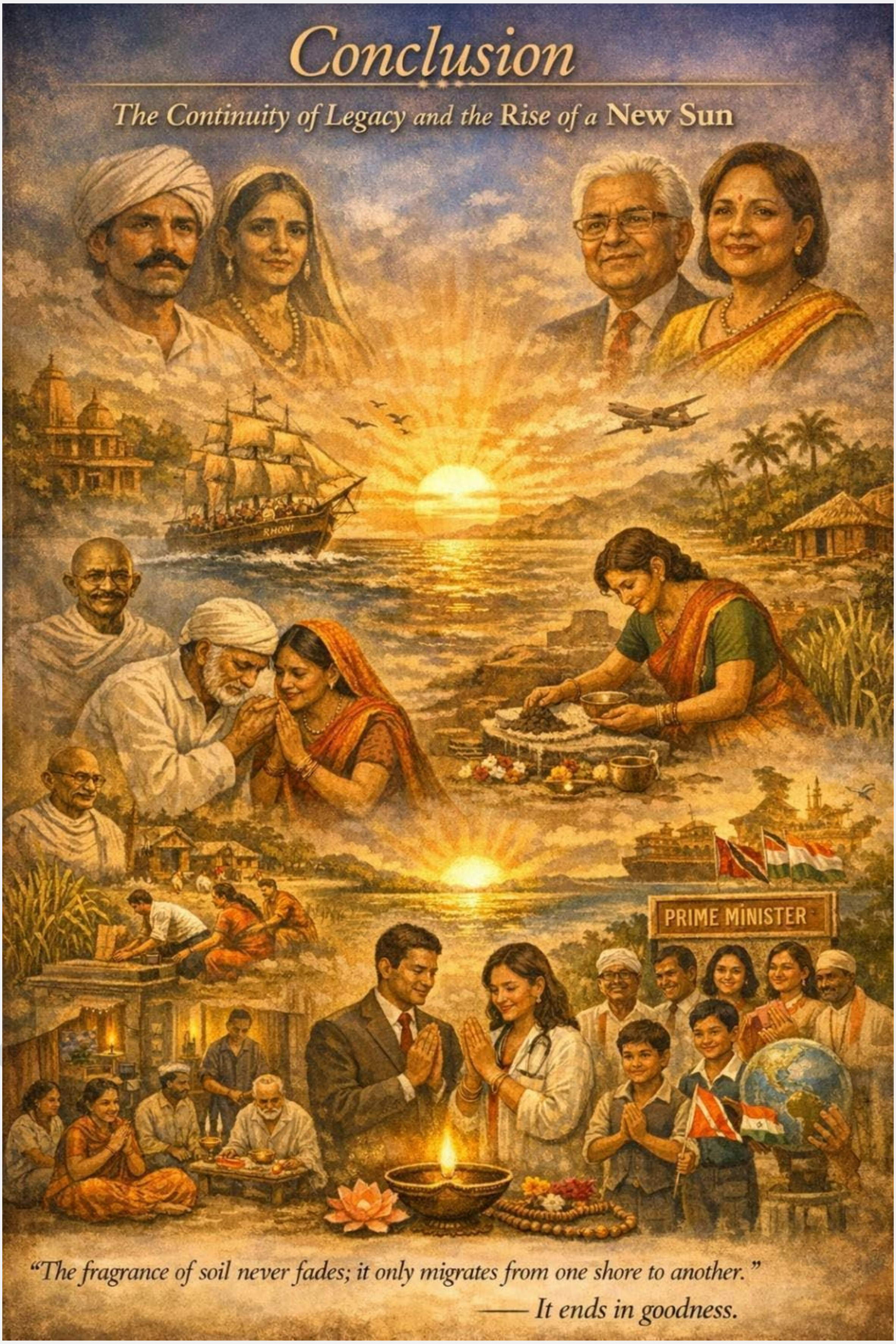
This saga affirms the philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*: "the whole world is one family." The void created by the migration of 1898 was filled by the reunion of 2007. Today, Trinidad's Ramnagar and Allahabad's Ramnagar are not separate; they are two chapters of the same story.

Our prayer for the future is that all walls of color, race, caste, and geography collapse. Just as the passengers of the ship *RHONI* erased their differences and embraced one another as *Jahaji* ship brothers, may today's world adopt the same brotherhood. Ramadhin Ramsahai's saga is not merely the success of one family; it is the triumph of human will.

Blessing

O Ishwar, keep the island of Trinidad forever prosperous, where the waves of the Ganga converse with the waters of the Atlantic. Grant courage, wisdom, and love for the soil to every soul living there. May this saga of perseverance remain a guiding light for all who endure the pain of migration, so they may know:

“Every migration is the prologue to a new life, provided man holds his roots close to his heart.”


Conclusion
The Continuity of Legacy and the Rise of a New Sun
RHONI
PRIME MINISTER
"The fragrance of soil never fades; it only migrates from one shore to another."
— It ends in goodness.

Conclusion: The Continuity of Legacy and the Rise of a New Sun

When we turn the final page of this tale that began with the turbulent journey of *Kala Pani*, we realize it is not merely the history of a family or a group, but a testament to the indomitable power of human will. In 1898, Ramadhin Ramsahai's departure from the soil of Ramnagar seemed like a small event, but a century later its impact proved that migrations, when watered with blood and sweat, can transform barren islands into flourishing gardens like Gandhi Village. The essence of this research is that man does not die even when cut off from his roots, provided he makes his cultural identity part of his soul.

Migration: A Creative Act

This study reveals that although the indentured labor system (*Girmit*) was one of the harshest forms of colonial oppression, Indians turned it into a "creative act" through their mental resilience. They transformed the chains meant to reduce them to "cheap labor" into ladders of progress. The union of Ramadhin Ramsahai and Sughari symbolizes that when the social walls of the old world, caste, collapse, a new and more humane world is born. The Indians of Trinidad proved they were not merely "workers in sugarcane fields," but architects of a civilization that established a new *Ram Raj* across the seas.

Survival of Identity: Music, Religion, and Soil

One of the most important lessons of this story is that the survival of any nation lies hidden in its "cultural assets." The voice of Soondrie Dwarika and her folk songs were not mere entertainment, but a "defensive shield" that protected Indian identity from being swept away in the storm of Western civilization. The establishment of Gandhi Village declared that material prosperity remains incomplete until a people restore their name and dignity. The journey from "Cooliewood" to "Gandhi Village" was, in fact, a journey from inferiority to pride.

The 2007 Journey: Completion of the Circle

Bhagwatie Bhanu Dwarika's return to Ramnagar in 2007 became the most powerful metaphor of this entire saga. It proved that no matter how much time passes, the debt of soil always remains. When families separated for a century reunited, it was not merely the union of two households, but the renewal of the bond between Bharat and Trinidad that began in 1898 with a thumbprint on a contract. This reunion shows that history never ends; it only searches for new chapters.

Similarities Between Ramnagar and Gandhi Village

Ramnagar and Gandhi Village share striking parallels in their way of life. Both feature the same pictures; modest homes shaped by local materials and traditions. Their buildings sit within similar landscapes, blending naturally into the rural surroundings. Food in both villages is simple and wholesome, rooted in local harvests and community sharing. Homes are warm, multigenerational spaces that embody continuity and belonging. Together, these elements highlight how both villages preserve heritage while fostering unity and resilience.

Message for the Modern Generation

Today, when we see Trinidad's Indians excelling in economy, politics, and literature, we understand the value of the "bundle" Ramadhin Ramsahai carried with him. For the new generation, the lesson is that their present comforts are the fruit of countless sleepless nights and the blood shed by their ancestors. They need not be ashamed of their "Indo-Trinidadian" identity; rather, it is a medal of honor, proof that their forefathers created an entire universe starting from zero.

Indian Arrival Day: A People's Triumph - 30 May

Indian indentureship in Trinidad began on 30 May 1845, when the ship *Fatel Razack* arrived with 275 laborers from Calcutta. In 1898, the vessel *RHONI* continued this migration, strengthening Indo-

Trinidadian communities across the sugar estates. By 1945, the centenary of Indian arrival was commemorated, honoring a century of resilience and contribution. These milestones, 1845, 1898, and 1945, mark the journey from indenture to identity, laying the foundation for cultural pride and recognition.

The first major commemoration was held on 30 May 1945 at Skinner Park, San Fernando, with the Acting Governor attending and messages read from Mahatma Gandhi. After the centenary, public memory faded. By the 1970s, only small processions by the Divine Life Society kept the date alive.

In 1976, the Indian Revival and Reform Association (*IRRA*) was formed. In 1978, a committee began distributing pamphlets to revive 30 May as Indian Emigration Day.

In 1979, the *IRRA* approached the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha (*SDMS*). Secretary General Satnarayan Maharaj hosted a celebration where the name was changed to Indian Arrival Day, honoring arrival as citizens, not departure as emigrants.

The celebration succeeded, and by 1985 more than ten major events took place annually.

In 1991, MPs called for a public holiday. In 1995, Prime Minister Patrick Manning declared 30 May a holiday, but proposed renaming it "Arrival Day." The following year, Prime Minister Basdeo Panday, a descendant of indentured laborers, restored the name Indian Arrival Day.

Today, 30 May is celebrated with parades, prayers, and cultural shows. May is observed as Indian Heritage Month. The holiday has inspired similar observances across the Caribbean and beyond.

The Unspoken Ordeal: Sexual Exploitation and the *Girmitiya* Woman

The journey across the ocean was full of hardship for all *Girmitiyas*, but for Indian women it was even harder. Many faced abuse and had no protection. Colonial officials often called them “immoral,” which made it easier for others to treat them badly.

Records from the ships show that violence was common. In 1885, a young woman named Maharani was attacked on the ship *Allanshaw* and died before reaching land. Her name was written down only as a statistic, but she was a real person, someone’s daughter, maybe someone’s mother.

The numbers on the ships were shocking: sometimes 400 men and only 14 women. This imbalance led to terrible violence. In Guyana, by 1871, women were killed at rates far higher than in India.

Even after arriving, women remained vulnerable. Plantations and courts offered no protection, and many tried desperate ways to avoid abuse, such as making themselves look less attractive. Their silence was not weakness; it was survival.

These stories remind us that indenture was not just about hard labor. It was a system that controlled women’s bodies and lives. The trauma did not end with the voyage; it carried on for generations. Remembering their struggle helps us honor their strength and dignity.

Indian Arrival Day: A Global Commemoration

Indian Arrival Day is marked each year in different parts of the world to honor the journeys and legacies of South Asian indentured laborers brought by European colonial powers in the nineteenth century. Through parades, prayers, and cultural programs, communities celebrate resilience, traditions, and the lasting contributions of the Indian diaspora.

Official Public Holidays

It is formally recognized in four nations:

Country	Date	Ship	Year
Mauritius	2 Nov	*Atlas*	1834
Guyana	5 May	Various	1838
Trinidad and Tobago	30 May	*Fatel Razack*	1845
Fiji	14 May	*Leonidas*	1879

Trinidad and Tobago was the first country to establish Indian Arrival Day as an official holiday, setting a precedent for others to follow.

Other Notable Observances

- **Suriname** - 5 June (Prawas Din, ship Lalla Rookh, 1873)
- **Grenada** - 1 May (ship Maidstone, 1857)
- **Jamaica** - 10 May (Indian Heritage Day)
- **Saint Vincent and the Grenadines** - 1 June (Indian Arrival Day) and 7 October (**Indian Heritage Day**)
- **Saint Lucia** - 6 May (commemorated informally, with ongoing campaigns for official recognition)

Crossing Oceans, But Not Minds: The Struggle of Indian Women

Today we live in a modern world where people have reached the moon and can talk across the globe in seconds through the internet. Life moves fast, but sadly, some men of Indian origin still believe they should control women and keep them "less important." This way of thinking goes against the world's progress toward equality.

In 2010, Kamla Persad-Bissessar made history as the first woman Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago and the first woman of Indian origin to lead a country outside India. Her success was huge, but many people still judged her not by her work, but simply because she was a woman.

Other women of Indian origin faced similar struggles. Indra Nooyi became CEO of PepsiCo, yet she spoke about the pressure to be both a strong leader and a “dutiful wife and mother.” Priyanka Chopra Jonas, a famous actress, has shared how women in entertainment are judged more harshly than men. In politics, Priti Patel, the former UK Home Secretary, was often criticized just for being a woman in a powerful role.

It is sad that these old ideas, carried across generations, still try to hold women back. Even though many Indians left their homeland, crossed the seas, and built new lives, some traditions of male dominance followed them. These beliefs are like chains from the past, and they remind us that true equality is still a fight we must continue.

The *Kanthi* Unbroken

Over time, the family’s dietary practices continued to evolve. Ramawad began drinking alcohol more frequently, and non-vegetarian food was gradually introduced into the household. Chicken and fish became part of the next generation’s meals, though initially cooked in separate pots, as if to preserve a fragile echo of the old vow. Pork and beef, however, were never prepared in the family kitchen, a boundary that held firm even as other traditions loosened. Still, a few members of the fourth generation would consume these meats outside the home, signaling how cultural and spiritual lines blurred with each passing era.

Thus, the story of the *Kanthi* in this family is not simply one of devotion or abandonment. It is a living chronicle of adaptation, a testament to the enduring tension between inherited vows and evolving desires, between the sanctity of tradition and the inevitability of change. In this way, the *Kanthi* remains both a sacred badge and a mirror of human frailty. It reminds us that faith is not only about purity, but also about the choices we make when purity is tested.

A Monument to Ramadhin: Community, Ritual, and Legacy

In July 2010, a memorable event was organized in Ramnagar to honor Ramadhin. There was the installation of a monument; a boat adorned with a plaque in his name. The occasion carried both reverence and festivity: a priest performed a solemn *puja* before the installation, sanctifying the moment with ritual significance. Invitations were extended far and wide, reaching dignitaries from nearby villages and drawing many from Ramnagar. Doctors, veterinarians, judges, lawyers, community leaders, schoolteachers, and neighbors all came together, nearly three hundred in number, to share in the celebration.

A lavish vegetarian feast was served, reflecting the family's enduring commitment to a fully vegetarian diet, a tradition still maintained in Ramnagar today. Children were especially delighted, each receiving packets of local sweets, a gesture of warmth and continuity. The event was not only a tribute to Ramadhin, but also a reaffirmation of community bonds, cultural values, and the family's legacy of hospitality and devotion.

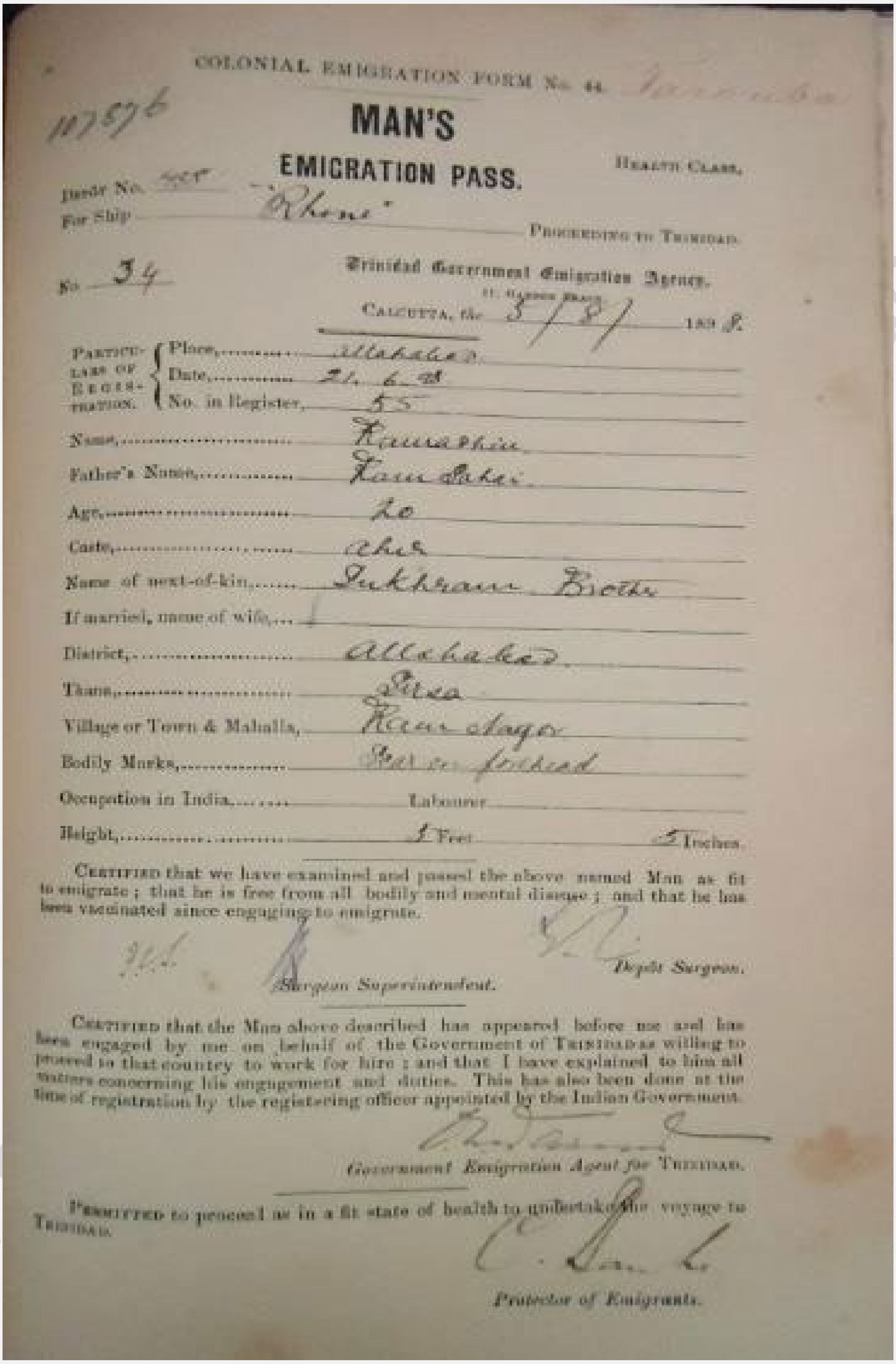
Final Words: Preserving the Legacy

Future historians writing the history of Trinidad will have to include figures likeRamadhin Ramsahai, Sughari, Soondrie Dwarika, and Bhagwatie Bhanu Dwarika, for they are contributing pillars upon which today's prosperity stands. This research ends with the hope that the voices rising from the soil of Gandhi Village will grow stronger in times to come. Whether our roots lie in Ramnagar of Allahabad or in Gandhi Village of Trinidad, our true homeland is that "humanity" which these elders kept alive even amid the waves of *Kala Pani*. This saga of perseverance will remain a source of courage for all who dream of building a new world far from their native land.

"The fragrance of soil never fades; it only migrates from one shore to another."

It ends in goodness.

Gallery of Memories



COLONIAL EMIGRATION FORM No. 44. [illegible]

11759b

MAN'S

EMIGRATION PASS.

HEALTH CLASS,

Depôt No. [illegible]

For Ship "Rhone" PROCEEDING TO TRINIDAD.

No. 34

Trinidad Government Emigration Agency,

CALCUTTA, the 5/8/ 1898.

PARTICULARS OF REGISTRATION. Place, Allahabad

Date, 21. 6. 98

No. in Register, 55

Name, Ramsakhi

Father's Name, Ram Sahai

Age, 20

Caste, Ahir

Name of next-of-kin, Sukhram Brother

If married, name of wife, —

District, Allahabad

Thana, Sirsa

Village or Town & Mahalla, Ramnagar

Bodily Marks, Scar on forehead

Occupation in India, Labourer

Height, 5 Feet 5 Inches.

CERTIFIED that we have examined and passed the above named Man as fit to emigrate; that he is free from all bodily and mental disease; and that he has been vaccinated since engaging to emigrate.

Surgeon Superintendent.

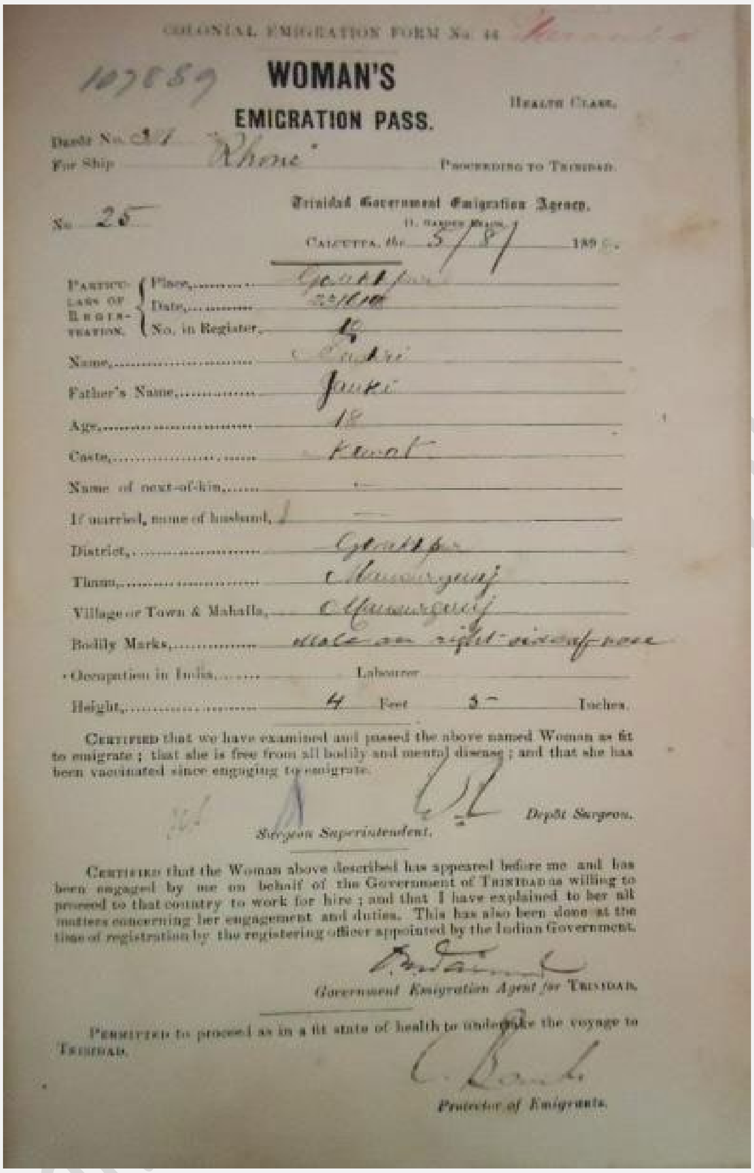
Depôt Surgeon.

CERTIFIED that the Man above described has appeared before me and has been engaged by me on behalf of the Government of TRINIDAD as willing to proceed to that country to work for hire; and that I have explained to him all matters concerning his engagement and duties. This has also been done at the time of registration by the registering officer appointed by the Indian Government.

Government Emigration Agent for TRINIDAD.

PERMITTED to proceed as in a fit state of health to undertake the voyage to TRINIDAD.

Protector of Emigrants.



COLONIAL EMIGRATION FORM No. 44

107859

WOMAN'S

EMIGRATION PASS.

HEALTH CLASS.

Depôt No. 31

For Ship Rhone PROCEEDING TO TRINIDAD.

Trinidad Government Emigration Agency,

No. 25

Calcutta, the 5/8/ 189

Particulars of Registration { Place, [illegible]

Date, 22/10/

No. in Register, 4

Name, [illegible]

Father's Name, [illegible]

Age, 18

Caste, Kewat

Name of next-of-kin, —

If married, name of husband, —

District, [illegible]

Thana, Maharajganj

Village or Town & Mahalla, Maharajganj

Bodily Marks, mole on right side of nose

Occupation in India, Labourer

Height, 4 Feet 3 Inches.

CERTIFIED that we have examined and passed the above named Woman as fit to emigrate; that she is free from all bodily and mental disease; and that she has been vaccinated since engaging to emigrate.

Surgeon Superintendent.

Depôt Surgeon.

CERTIFIED that the Woman above described has appeared before me and has been engaged by me on behalf of the Government of TRINIDAD as willing to proceed to that country to work for hire; and that I have explained to her all matters concerning her engagement and duties. This has also been done at the time of registration by the registering officer appointed by the Indian Government.

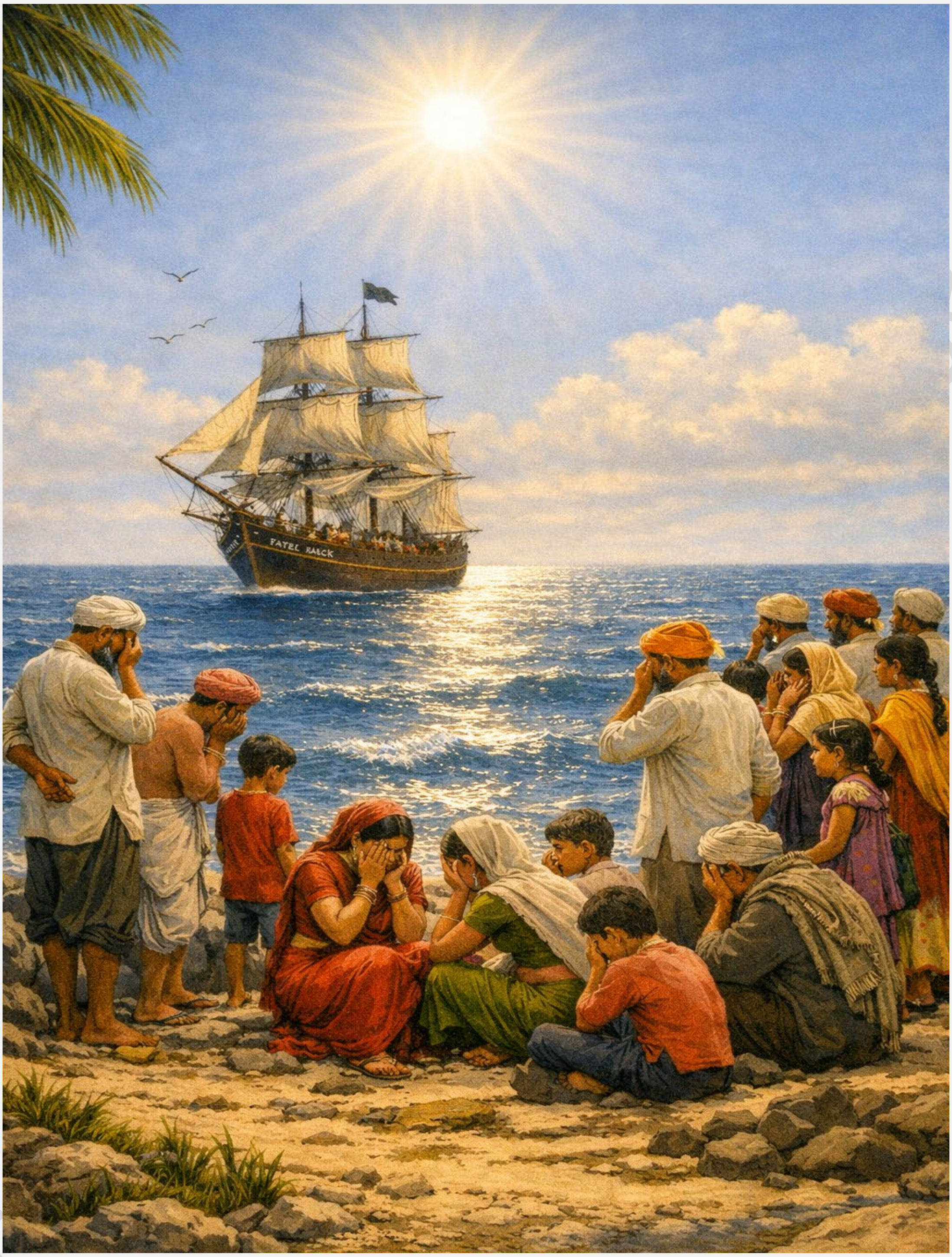
Government Emigration Agent for TRINIDAD.

PERMITTED to proceed as in a fit state of health to undertake the voyage to TRINIDAD.

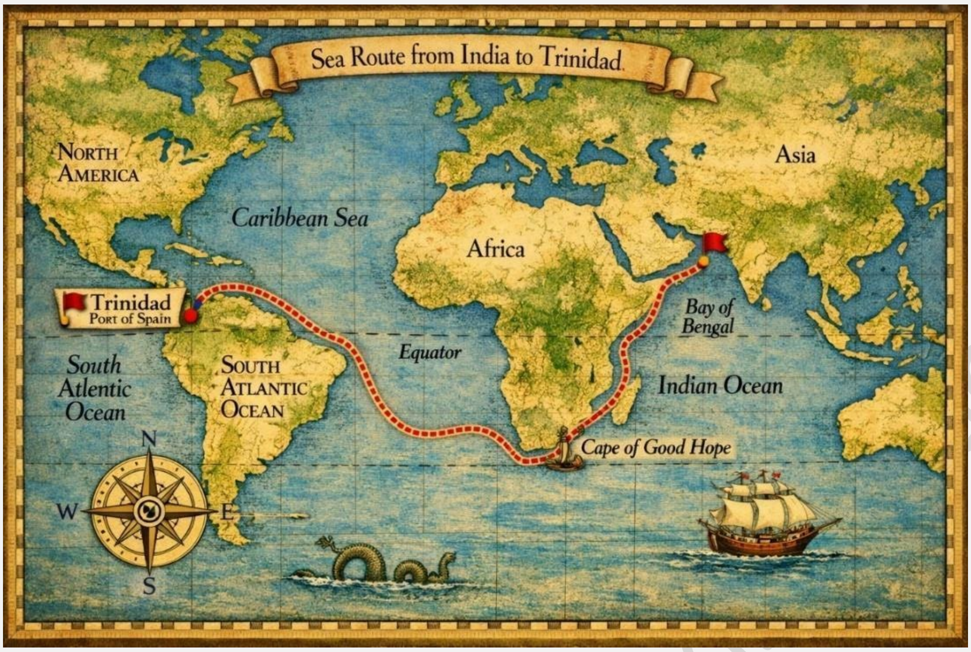
Protector of Emigrants.

Landing Document of Ramadhin Ramsahai and Sughari

A testament to the journey from India to Trinidad, marking the beginning of a legacy carried across generations (there are additional landing documents in Bhanu’s possession, however, the most relevant document has been included in the gallery)

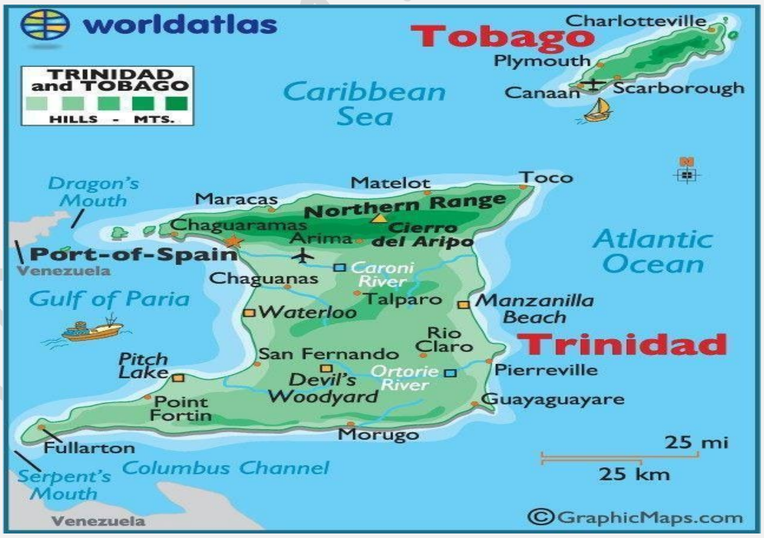


Departure of *RHONI* from Calcutta Port (Reconstructed)


Sea Route from India to Trinidad
North America
Asia
Caribbean Sea
Africa
Trinidad
Port of Spain
Bay of Bengal
Equator
South Atlentic Ocean
South Atlantic Ocean
Indian Ocean
Cape of Good Hope
N
W
E
S

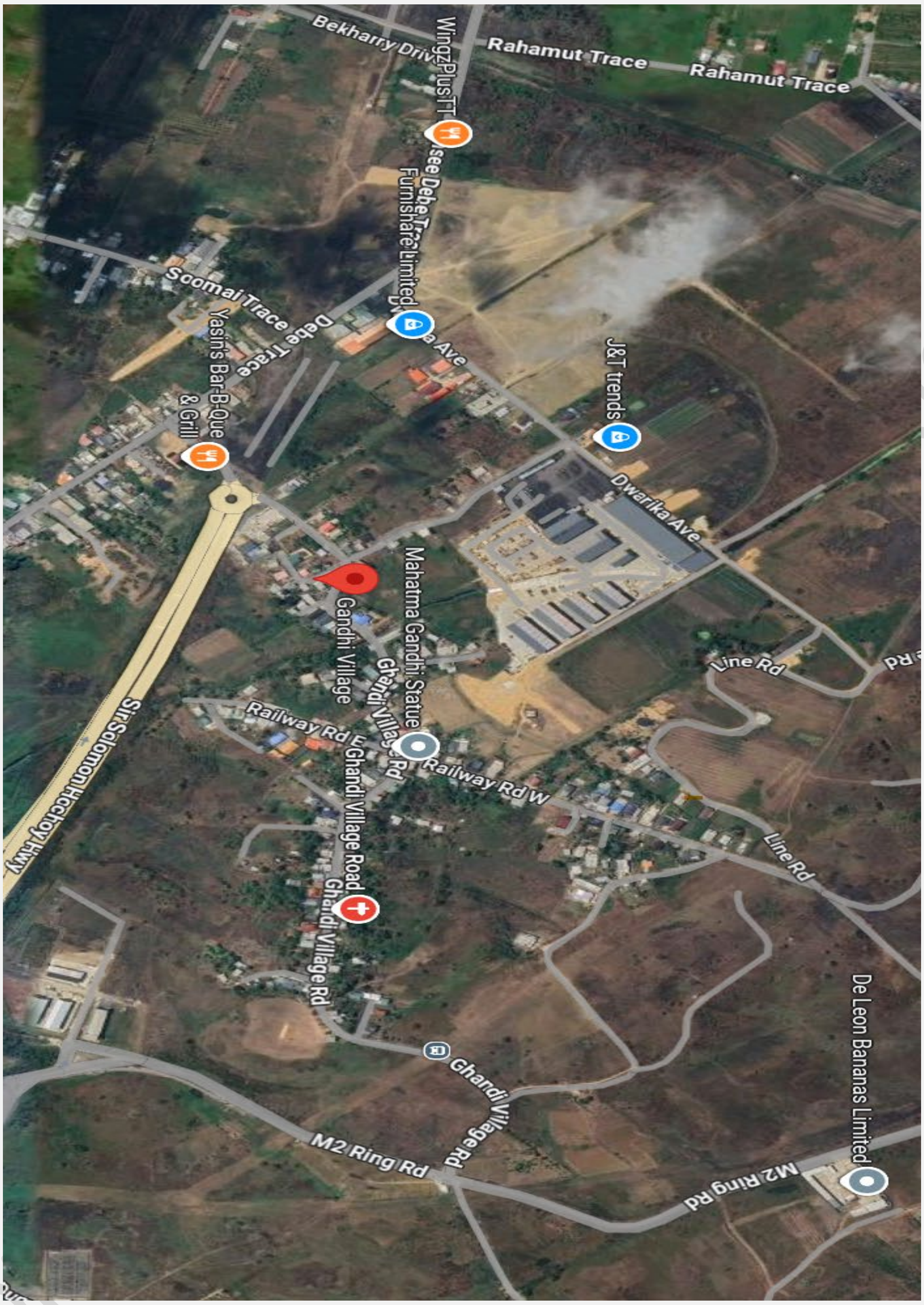
Sea Route from India to Trinidad

Tracing the historic voyage of indentured laborers across the oceans.


worldatlas
TRINIDAD and TOBAGO
HILLS - MTS.
Tobago
Charlotteville
Plymouth
Canaan
Scarborough
Caribbean Sea
Dragon's Mouth
Maracas
Matelot
Toco
Northern Range
Chaguaramas
Cierro del Aripo
Arima
Port-of-Spain
Venezuela
Chaguanas
Caroni River
Atlantic Ocean
Gulf of Paria
Waterloo
Talparo
Manzanilla Beach
Rio Claro
Trinidad
San Fernando
Pitch Lake
Devil's Woodyard
Ortorie River
Pierreville
Point Fortin
Guayaguayare
Morugo
Fullarton
25 mi
25 km
Serpent's Mouth
Columbus Channel
Venezuela
©GraphicMaps.com

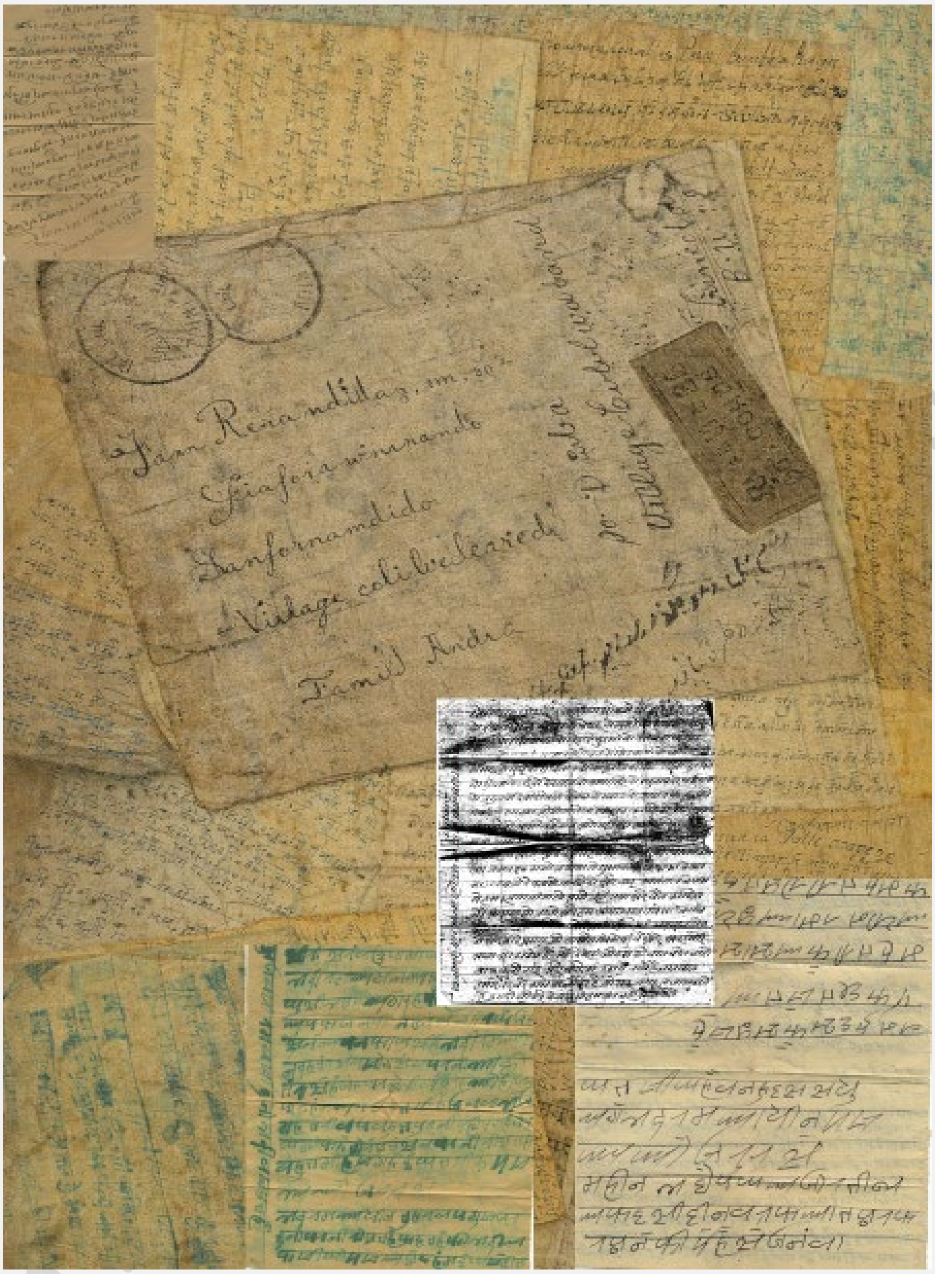
Ramadhin Ramsahai's Destination

Trinidad & Tobago map.


Bekharry Drive
Rahamut Trace
Rahamut Trace
WingzPlusTT
Debe Trace
Furnishare Limited
Soomai Trace
Debe Trace
Yasins Bar-B-Que & Grill
J&T trends
Dwarika Ave
Dwarika Ave
Gandhi Village
Mahatma Gandhi Statue
Ghandi Village Rd
Railway Rd
Railway Rd W
Ghandi Village Road
Ghandi Village Rd
Line Rd
Line Rd
Sir Solomon Hochoy Hwy
Ghandi Village Rd
M2 Ring Rd
M2 Ring Rd
De Leon Bananas Limited

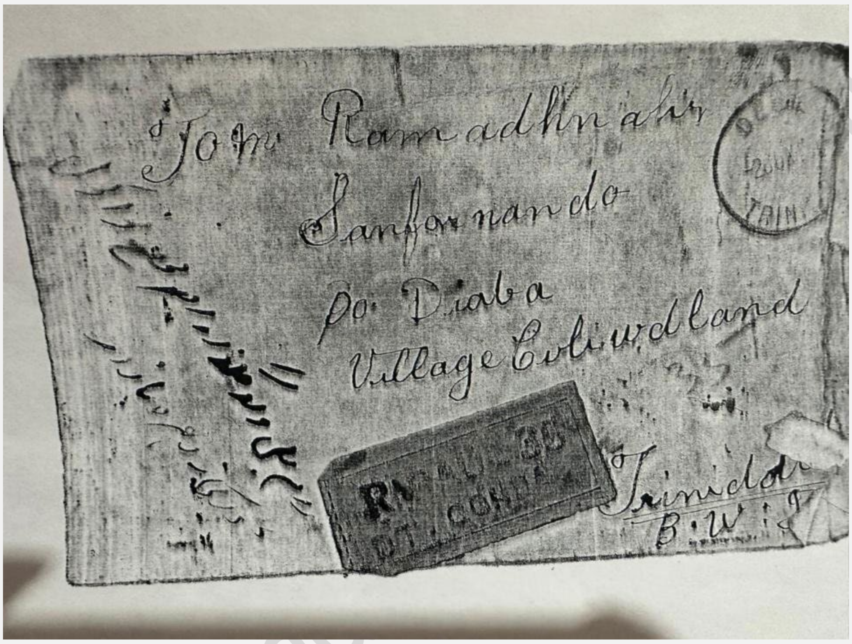
Gandhi Village and Dwarika Avenue

Shown side by side on Google Maps, reflecting the close-knit geography of family roots in Trinidad.



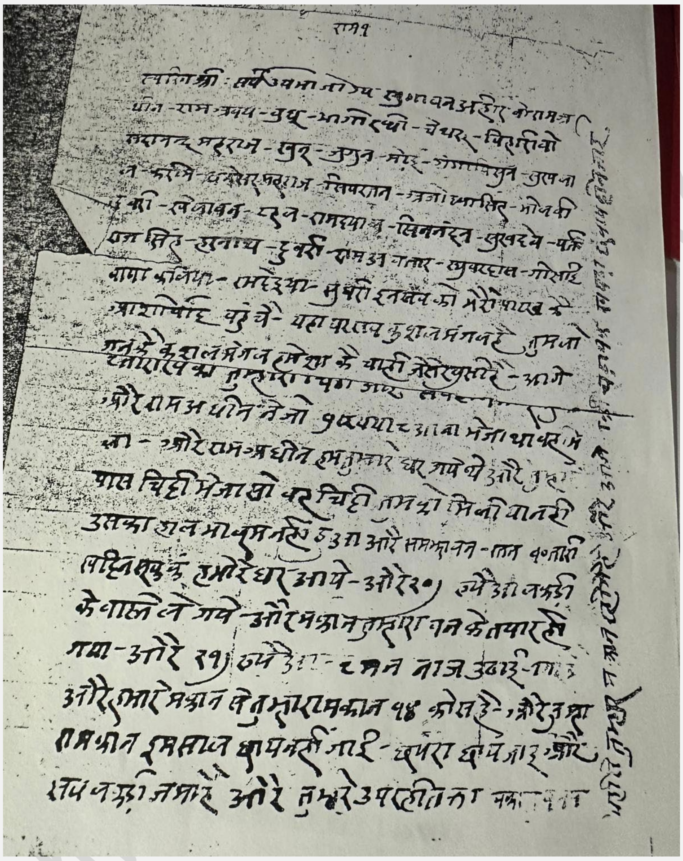
From
ge

Envelope and Family Letters from Trinidad
Handwritten letters received by Ramadhin in Trinidad, carefully preserved alongside correspondence from his relatives, offering a poignant glimpse into the enduring threads of family communication across generations.



To m Ramadhn ahir
Sanfornando
Po Diaba
Village Coliwdland
Trinida
B.W.I

Envelope



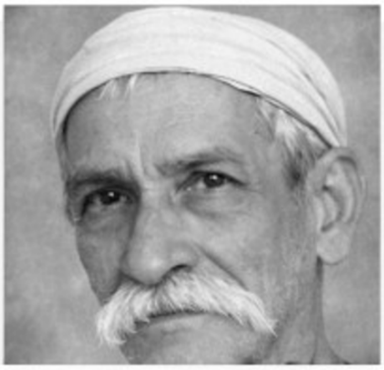
राम१

स्वस्तिश्री : सर्व उपमा जोग्य [illegible] अहिर [illegible]
धीन - राम अवध - बुधू - भागीरथी - चेथरू - सिउरतिवो
सदानन्द महराज - सुर - जुगुन - मोर - [illegible]
न - करमि - धमेसर महराज - सिवरतन - [illegible] - मोजकी
[illegible] - सेवावन - दूज - रामदया - सिवनरेस - सुखदेव - [illegible]
पत्र लिखि - सुनाथ - दुखी - राम अवतार - सुकरदास - गोसाई
नाना [illegible] - रमेहया - सुधीर इतजन को मेरो पायलव के
आशीर्वाद पहुँचे - यहा का सब कुशल मंगल है तुमको
मंगल कुशल भेजन हमेशा के चाही नेसरवस्ते है - आगे
और रामअधीन नेजो १० रुपया ८ आना भेजा था वह मे
ला - और राम अधीन हम तुम्हार घर गये थे और तुम्हा
पास चिट्ठी भेजाओ वह चिट्ठी तुमको मिली या नहीं
उसका हाल मालूम नहीं हुआ और समझावन - लाल [illegible]
लिखित [illegible] हमारे घर आये - और २० रुपैया लकड़ी
के वास्ते ले गये - और मकान तुम्हारा बन के तयार हो
गया - और २१ रुपैया [illegible] नाज उधार - [illegible]
और हमारे मकान से तुम्हारा मकान १४ कोस है - और तुम्हा
रामधीन इमसाल छाप नहीं जाई - छपरा छप जाइ और
[illegible] नफ़ा [illegible] और तुम्हारे उपराति का [illegible]

[illegible]

One family letter that Ramadhin received in Trinidad

Sughari



Ramadhin

Gangajellie

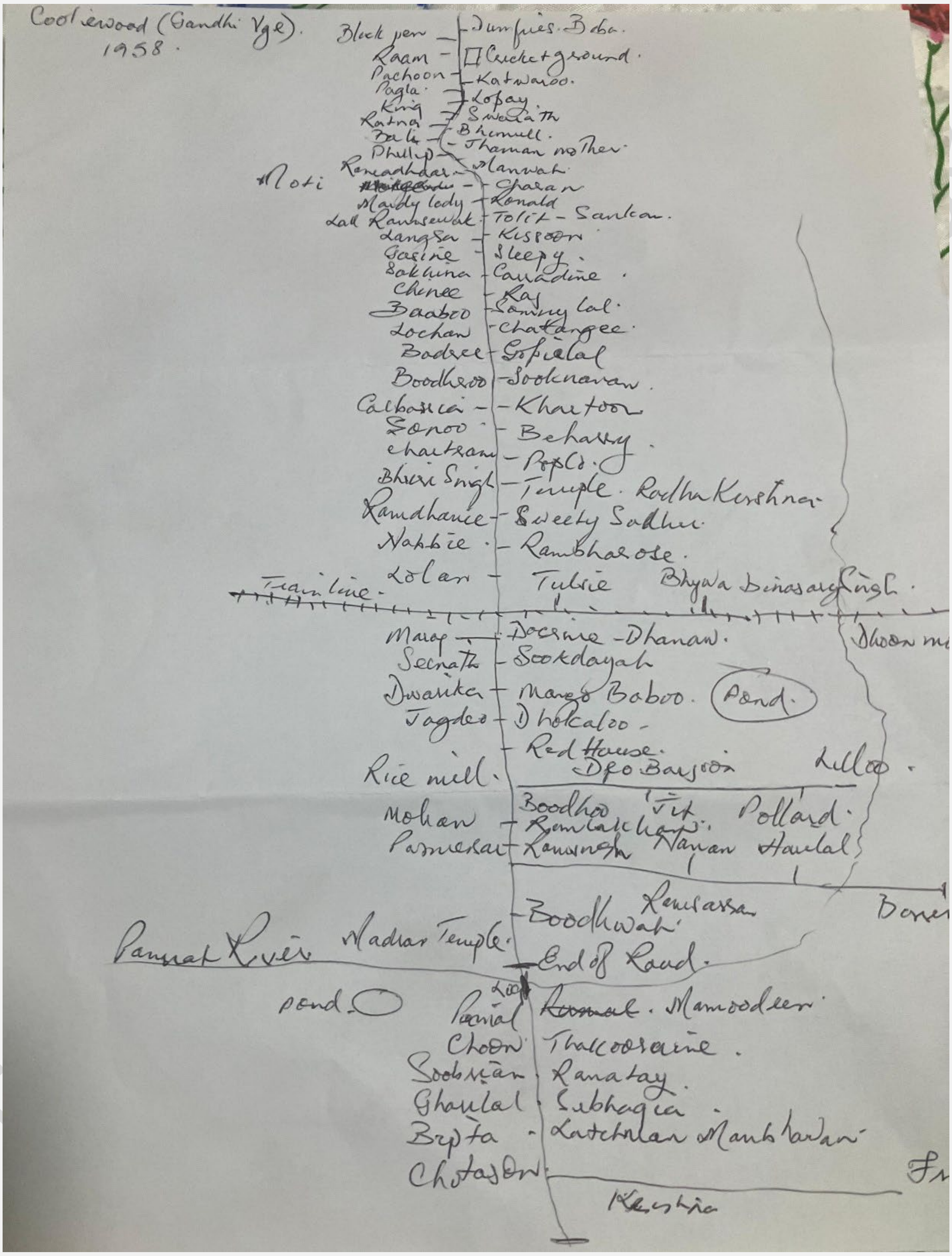
Ramawad

Soondrie

Dwarika

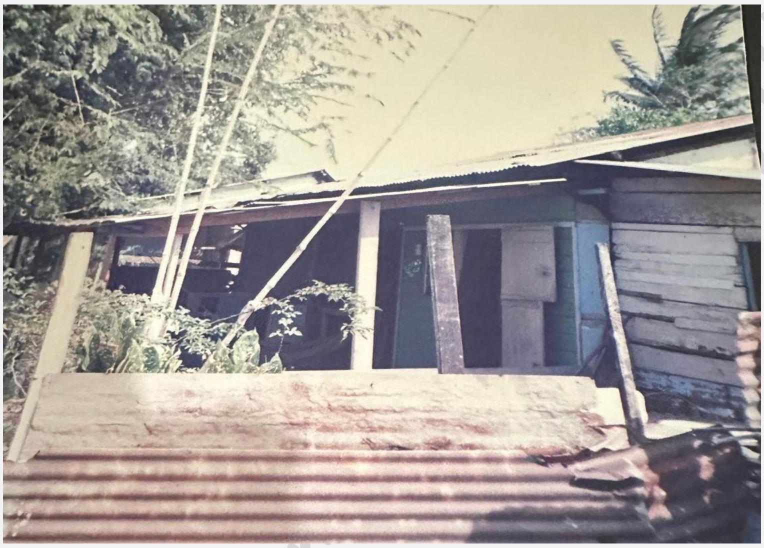
Reconstructed

Ramadhin was married to Sughari, and together they had a son named Ramawad. Ramawad's wife was Gangajelle, and their son was Dwarika. Dwarika later married Soondrie.

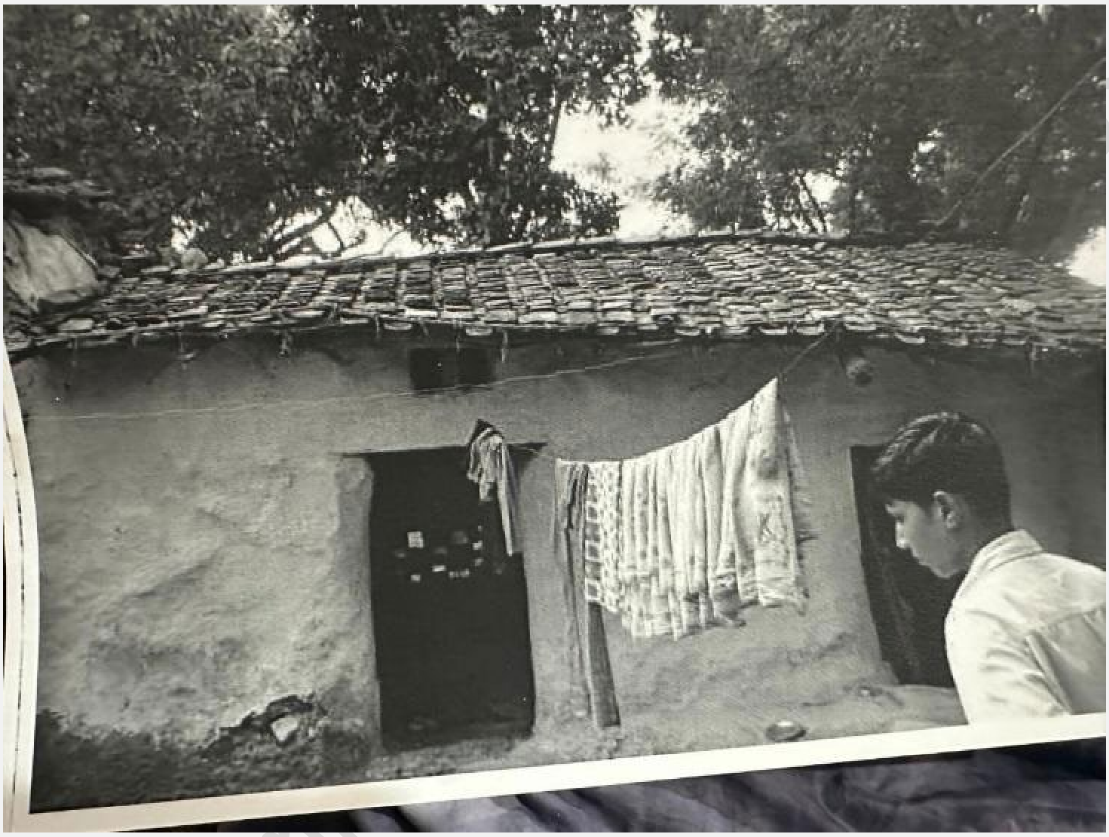

Cooliewood (Gandhi Vge).
1958.
Black pen
Dumfries. Boba.
Raam
Cricket ground.
Pachoon
Katwaroo.
Pagla.
Lopay
King
Sweerath
Ratna
Bhemull.
Bale
Jhaman mother.
Phillip
Manwah
Ramadhaar
Moti
Charan
Maddy lady
Ronald
Lall Ramsewak
Tolit – Sankar.
Langsa
Kissoon
Gasine
Sleepy.
Sakhina
Canadine.
Chenee
Ray
Baaboo
Sammy Lal.
Lochan
Chatangee.
Badree
Gopielal
Boodhoo
Sooknanan.
Calbassa
Khartoon
Sonoo.
Beharry.
Chaitram
Pop Co.
Bhiri Singh
Temple. Radha Krishna
Ramdhanie
Sweety Sadhu.
Nabbie.
Rambharose.
Lolan
Tulsie
Bhywa Dinasary Singh.
Train line.
Marap
Doerine – Dhanan.
Seenath
Sookdayah
Dwarika
Mango Baboo.
Pond.
Jagdeo
Dholcaloo.
Red House.
Deo Barsoon
Lilloo.
Rice mill.
Dhoon m
Mohan
Boodhoo
Jit
Pollard.
Ramlakhan.
Parmesar
Ramsingh
Narian
Harilal
Ramsarran
Boodhwah
Bone
Pannat River
Madras Temple.
End of Road.
Loo
pond.
Panial
~~Rosmal~~. Mamoodeen.
Choon
Thakoorainie.
Soobrian
Ranatay.
Ghanlal
Subhagia.
Brpta
Latchman Manbhawan.
Chotaboy
Fr
Kestria

Gandhi village in 1958 Map of residents of Gandhi Village as recorded by Ramnarace Dwarika

Indentured laborer

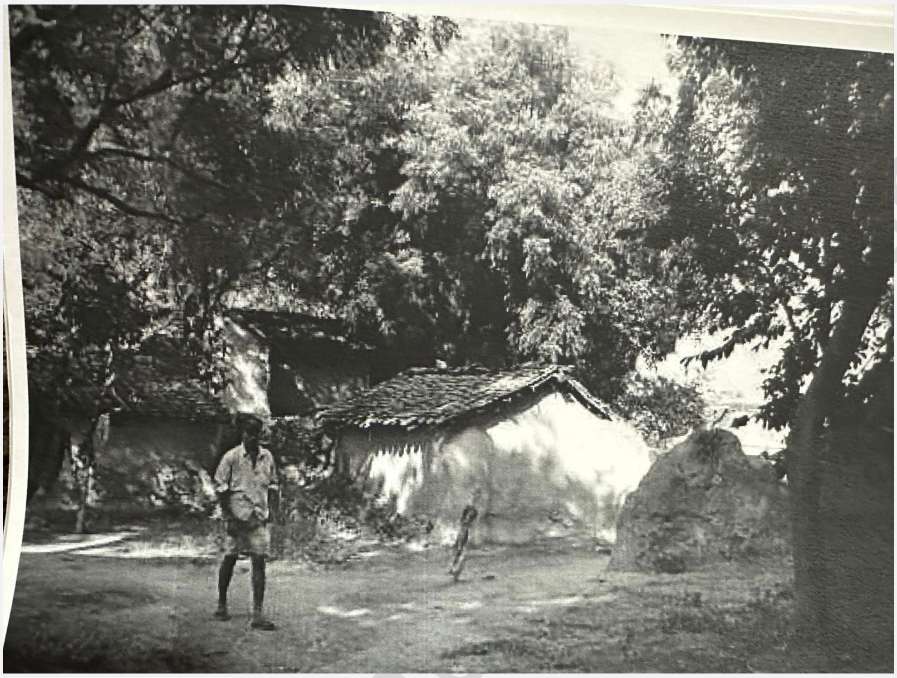


Residence of a surviving indentured laborer in Gandhi Village. Bhanu Dwarika interviewed him at his residence in 1985.

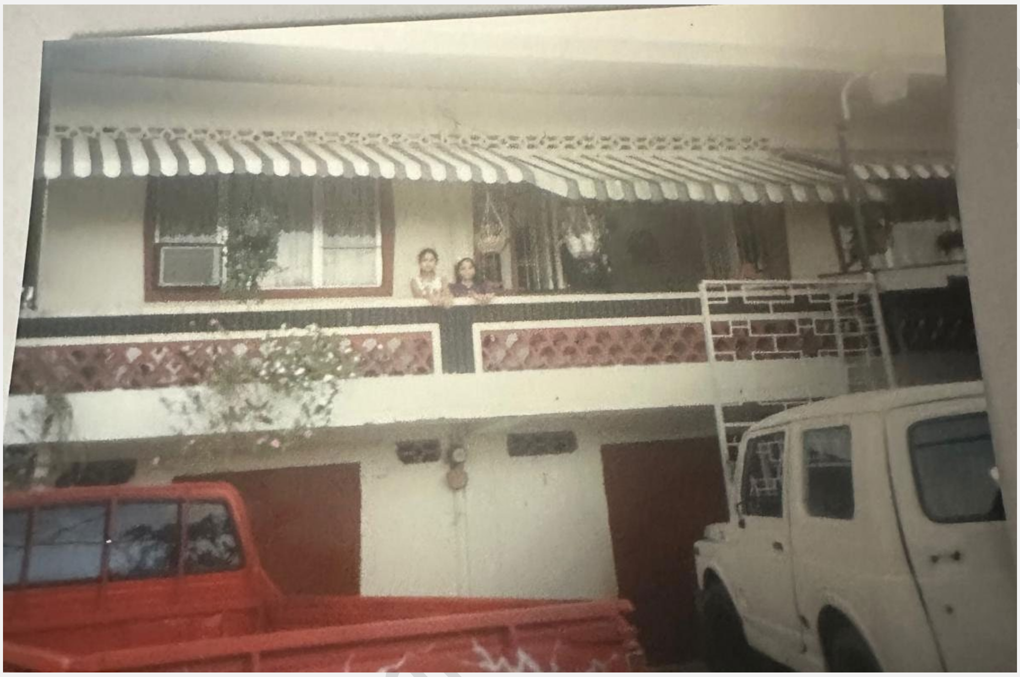


From Ram

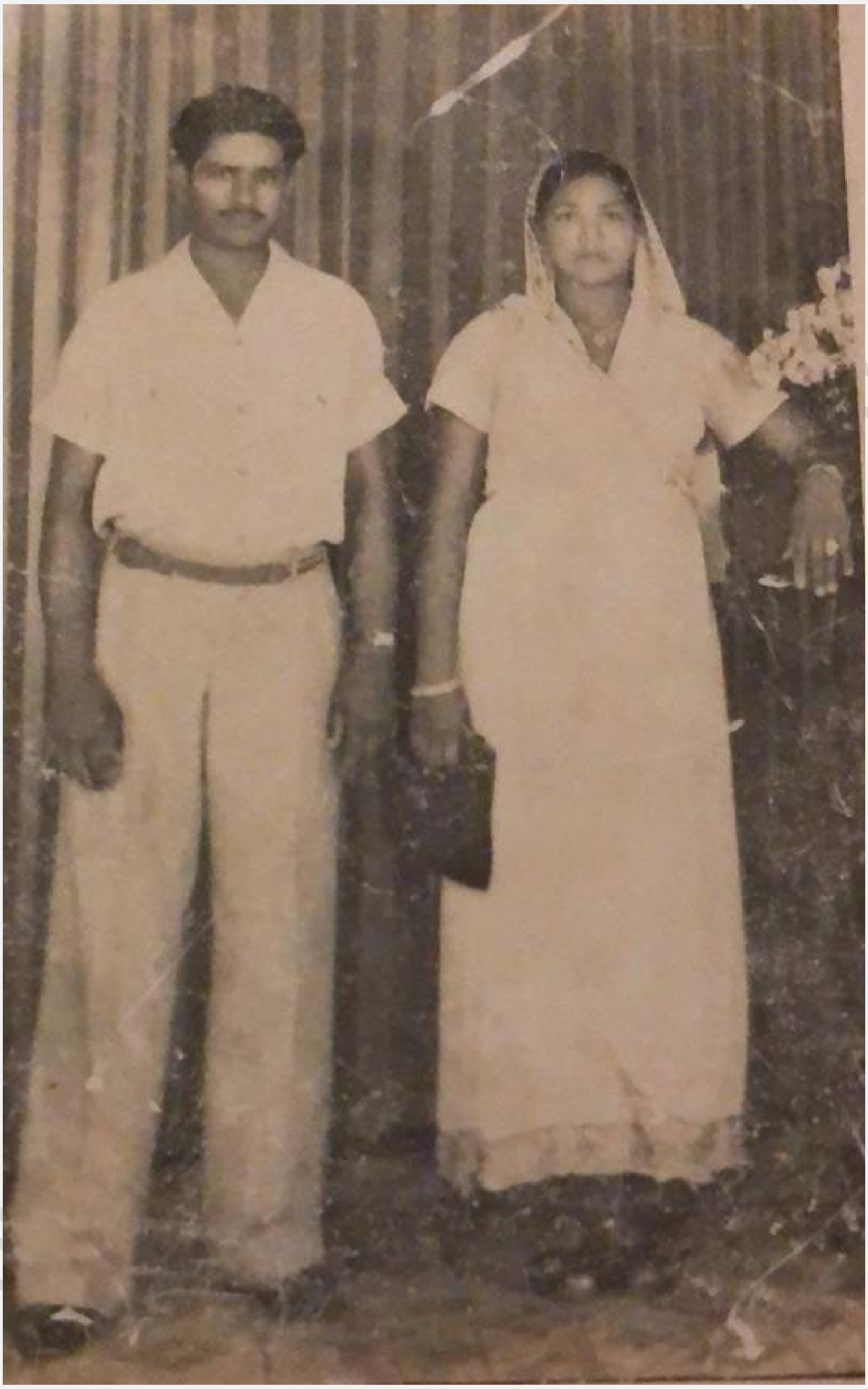
Photos of relatives in Ramnagar, taken in 2007



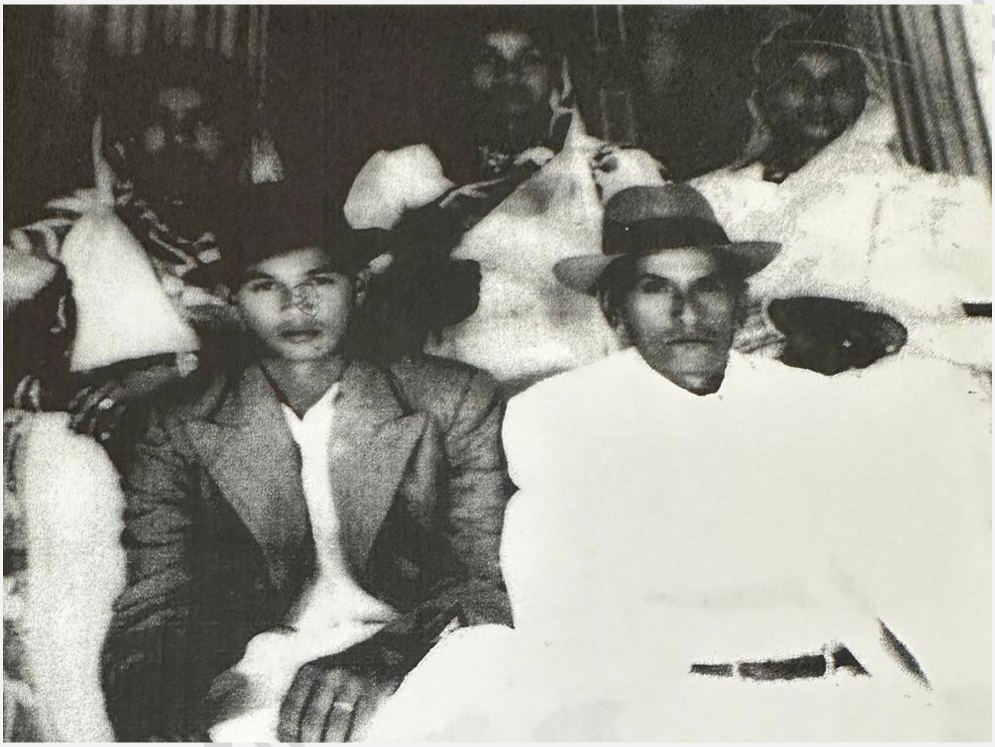
Remnants of Ramadhin's family property in India
It was believed that he was sending money to rebuild the family home as well as to pay debt left behind.



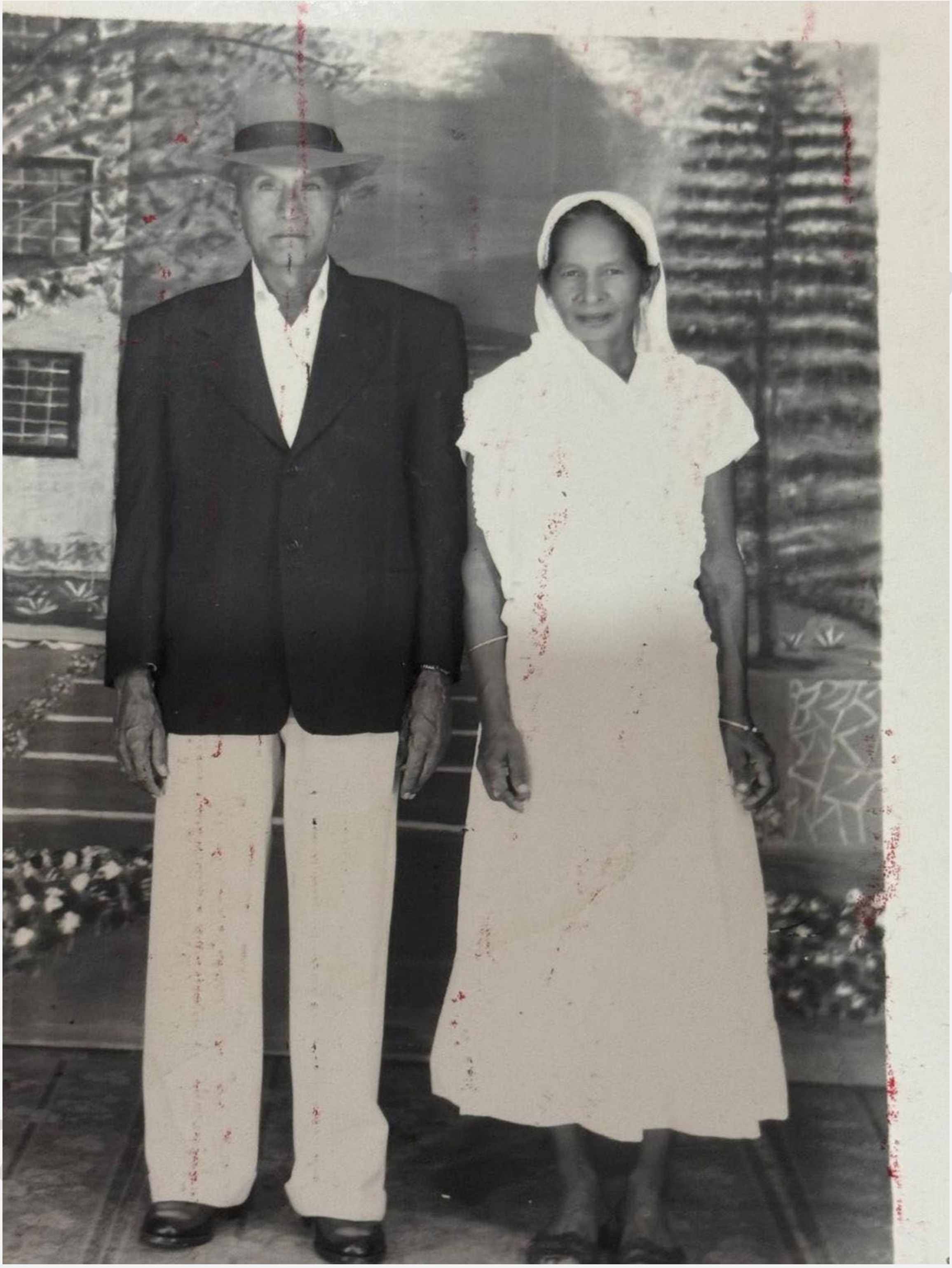
Family home in Gandhi Village
Where Ramawad, his wife, son, daughter-in-law, and twelve grandchildren lived.



Dwarika and Soondrie

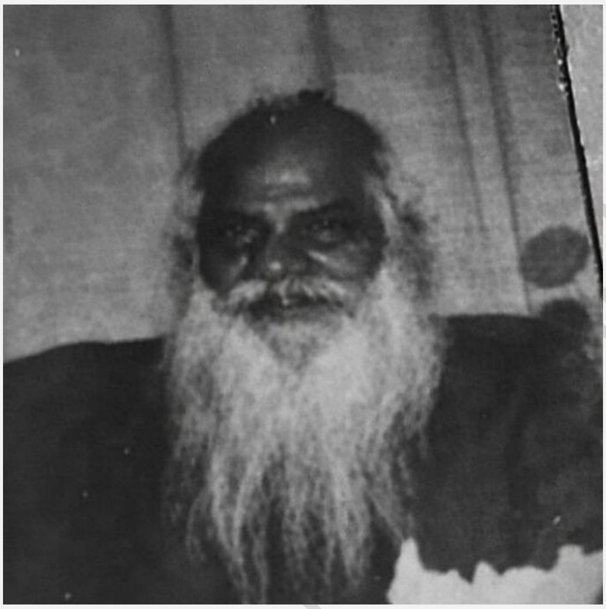


Soondrie’s family before marriage



Soondrie's father and mother

Soondrie’s parents, brothers, and sisters

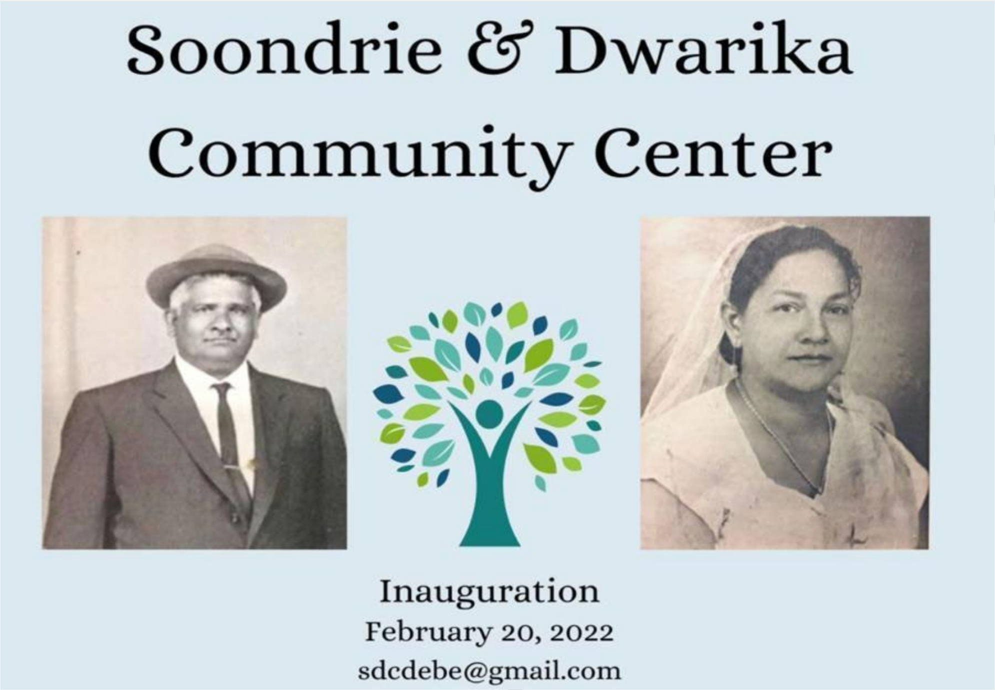


Raghubance Tewarie (commonly known as Darahee Baba)
The nearest priest and counselor to Gandhi Village, and godfather to many of Ramadhin's great-grandchildren.

PEPSI

BeautyPlus

Mr. Ramkhelawan
A left-behind relative in Ramnagar. He has now passed on.



Soondrie & Dwarika
Community Center

Inauguration
February 20, 2022
sdcdebe@gmail.com

Soondrie & Dwarika Community Centre

Soondrie & Dwarika Community Centre
for
Health Care and Training

Inauguration of Soondrie & Dwarika Community Center

Bhanu with Kamla Persad-Bissessar
First female Prime Minister.

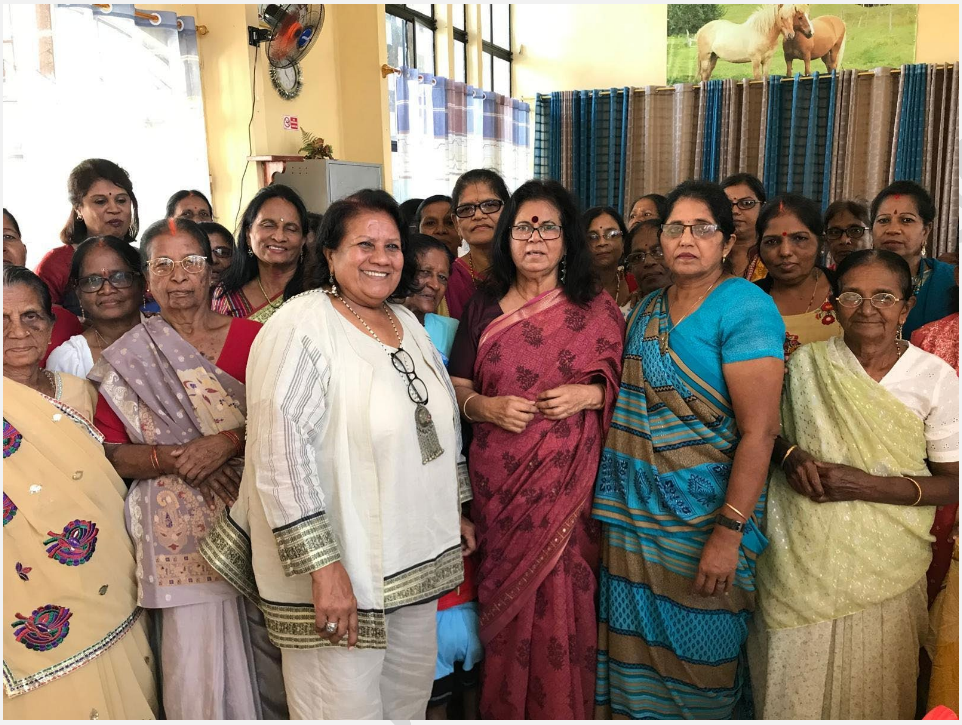
TION OF PEOPLE
IGIN (GOPIO)

Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Thomas Abraham (President of GOPIO), and Bhanu Dwarika attending a GOPIO function in New York.

Typical musical evening
Soondrie on the drum, with her family enjoying her lively singing.

Bhanu Dwarika, 1985
Addressing the inaugural meeting with Indo-Caribbean leaders. Foundation meeting for the Indo-Caribbean of North America. Seated in the front row is Mohammed Saffarally.

Prime Minister ANR Robinson of Trinidad and Tobago at a Head of States meeting at the United Nations in New York.



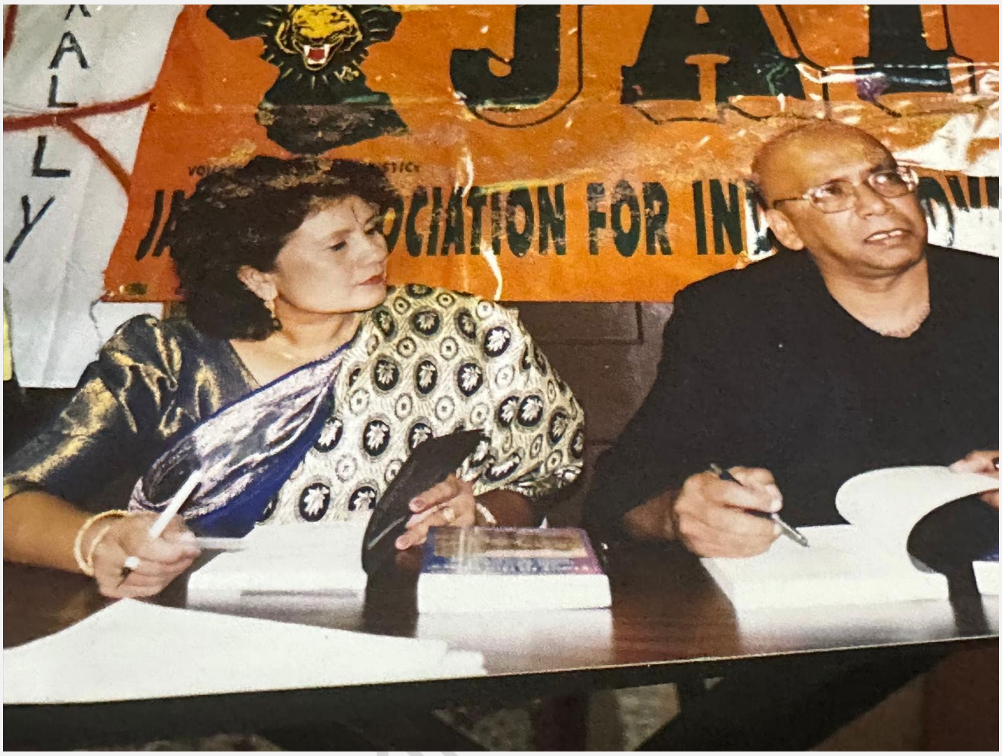
Dr. Sarita Boodhoo (middle), Bhanu Dwarika, and members of a Geet Gawai group at a community center in Mauritius.

Women in the villages often met to practice songs passed on by elders and sung at weddings or other typical family functions.

Bhanu Dwarika and Minister Prithviraj Singh Roopun of Mauritius at his office in the Ministry of Arts & Culture.

He was later appointed President of Mauritius.

Author VS Naipaul and Bhanu Dwarika at New York University (NYU)


RALLY
JAI
ASSOCIATION FOR IND

Author Clem Seecharan and Bhanu Dwarika

Honorable Dr. Bharrat Jagdeo, former Prime Minister and President of Guyana and Bhanu Dwarika

Honorable Cheddi Jagan, former Premier and President of Guyana

Bhanu Dwarika interviewing him in Queens, New York

Bhanu Dwarika receiving a Lifetime Achievement award from the Trinidad and Tobago Consul General Honorable Dr. Radrawatee Nan Ramgoolam in New York

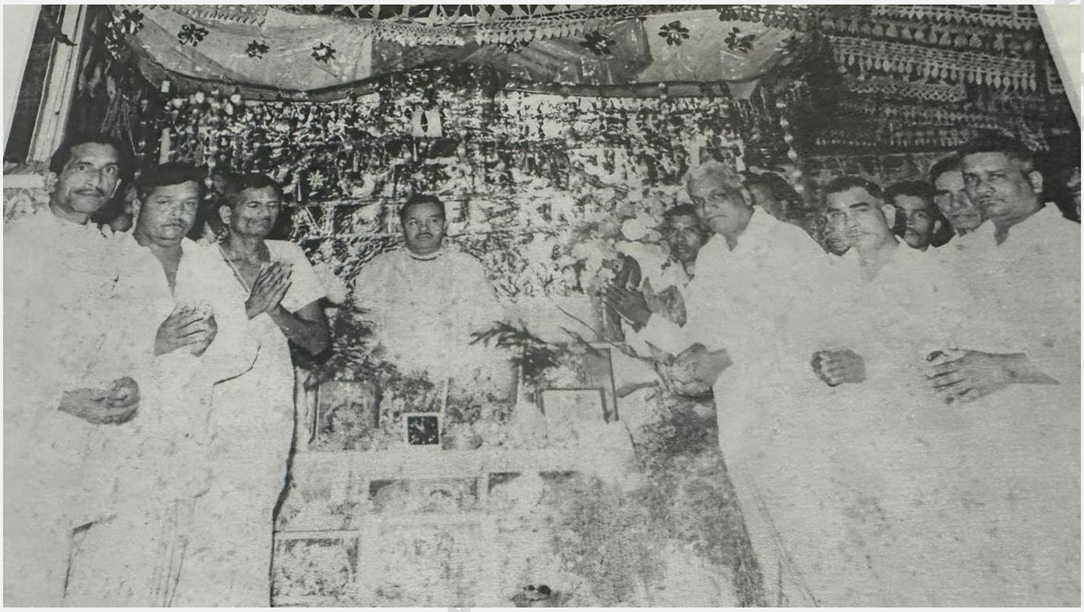
Meeting in New York with PM Vajpayee of India

Members of the Indo Caribbean Federation of North America including Rudra Nath (President), Bhanu Dwarika (Vice President), Gora Singh, James Pirmal, Roop Persad

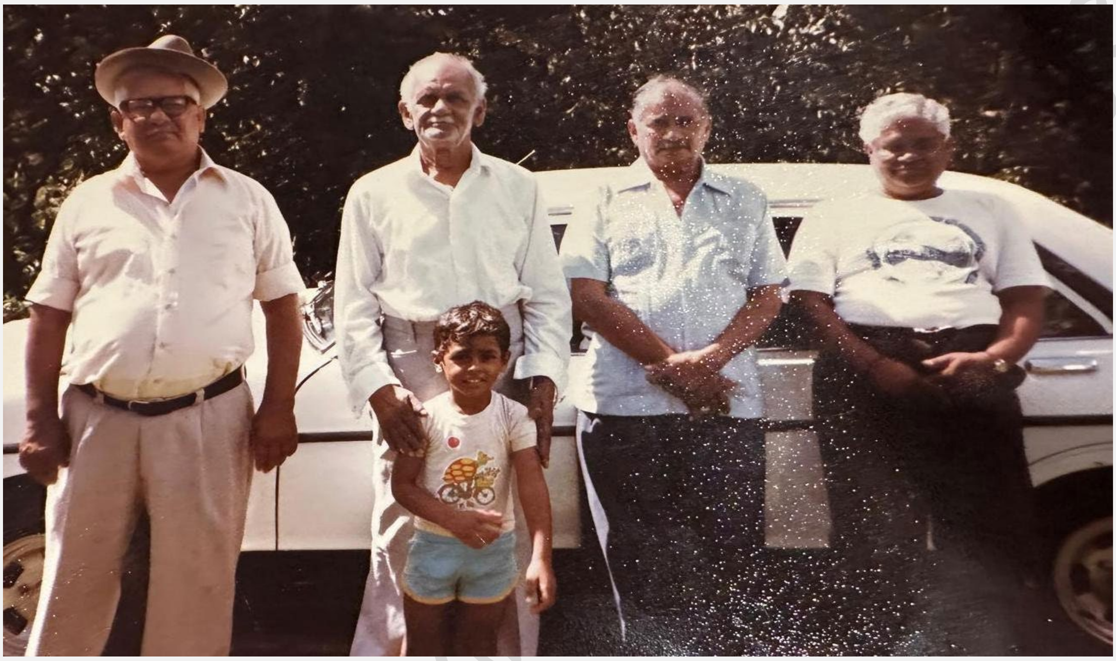
Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago Basdeo Panday with his wife, Oma Panday, and Bhanu Dwarika

BD interviews with Prime Minister of Mauritius

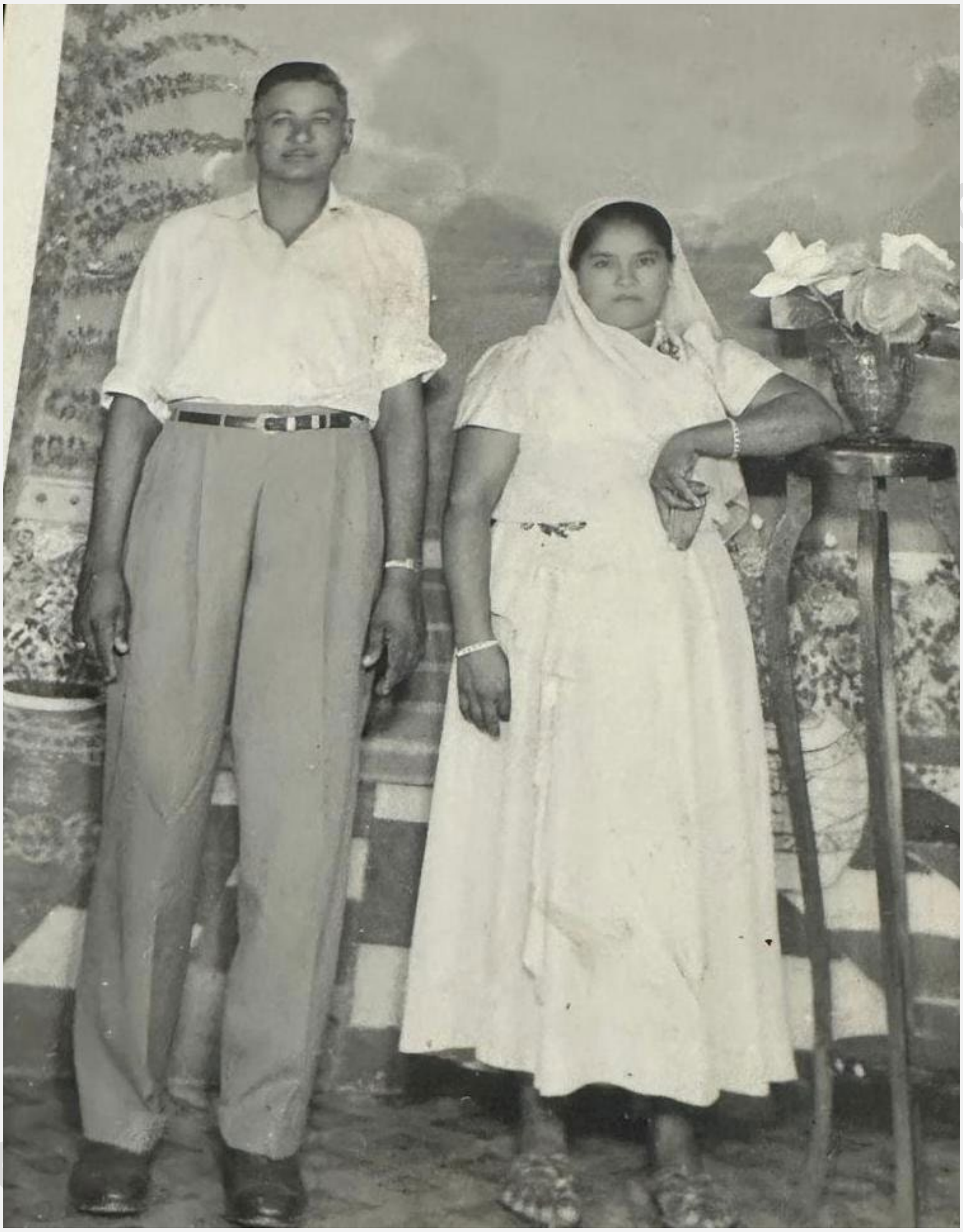
Sir Anerood Jugnauth



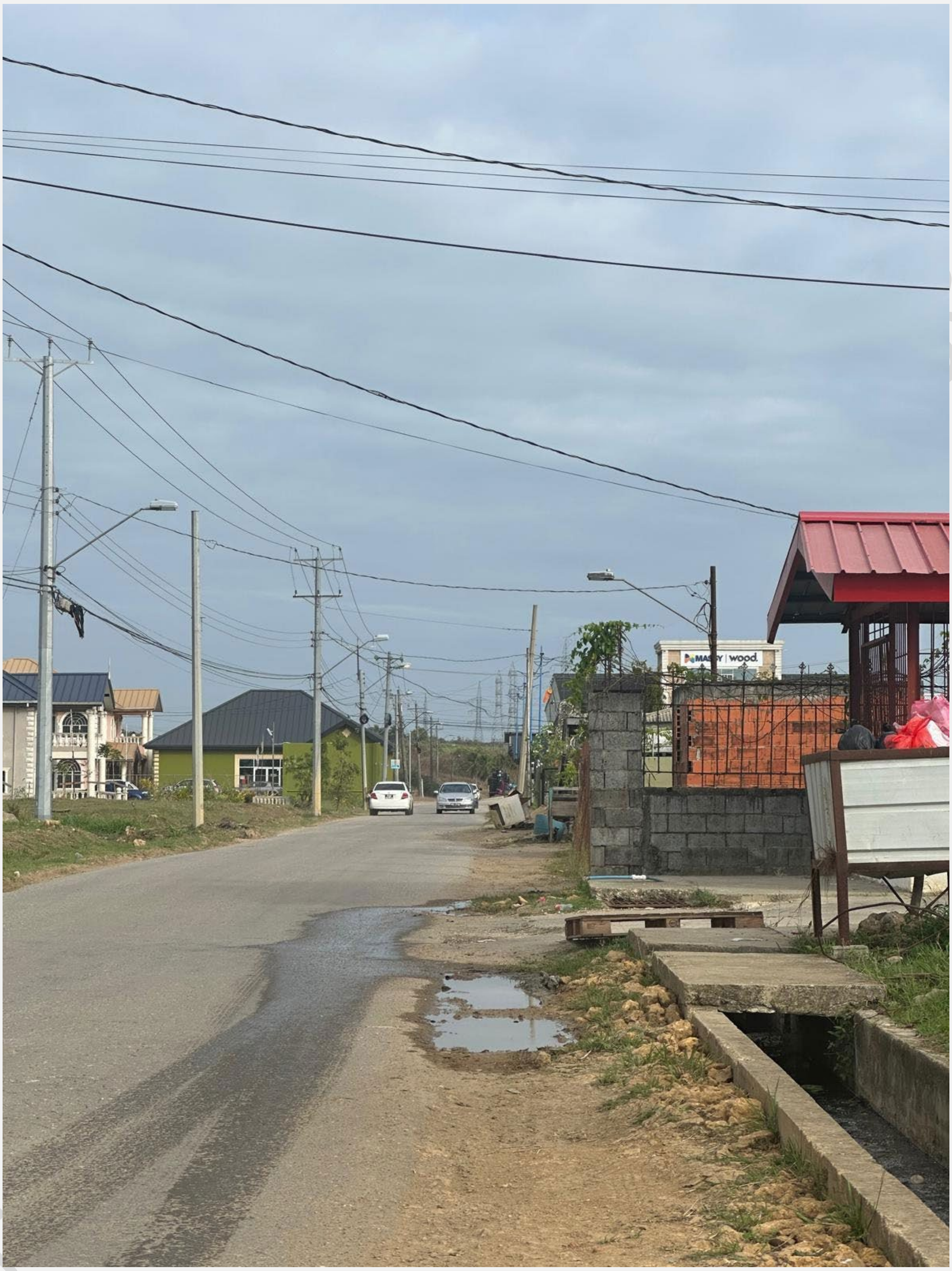
Dwarika Ramawad and other villagers
At a village *yagna* in Gandhi Village Krishna *Mandir*.



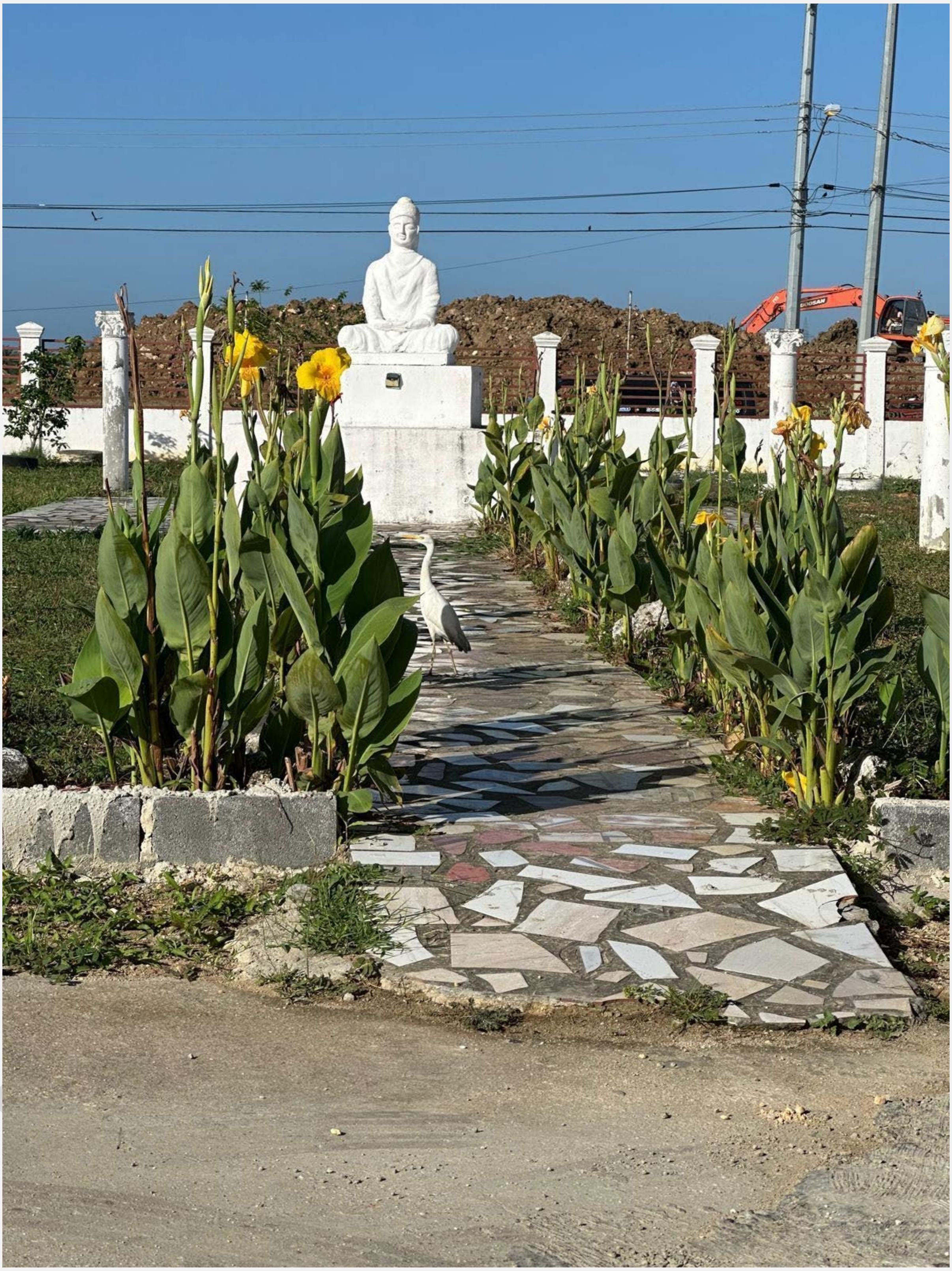
Dwarika Ramawad and his uncles Madan, Rattan, and Boochoon Baijoo.



Pundit Deo Maharaj and Kowsil Soondrie’s elder sister.

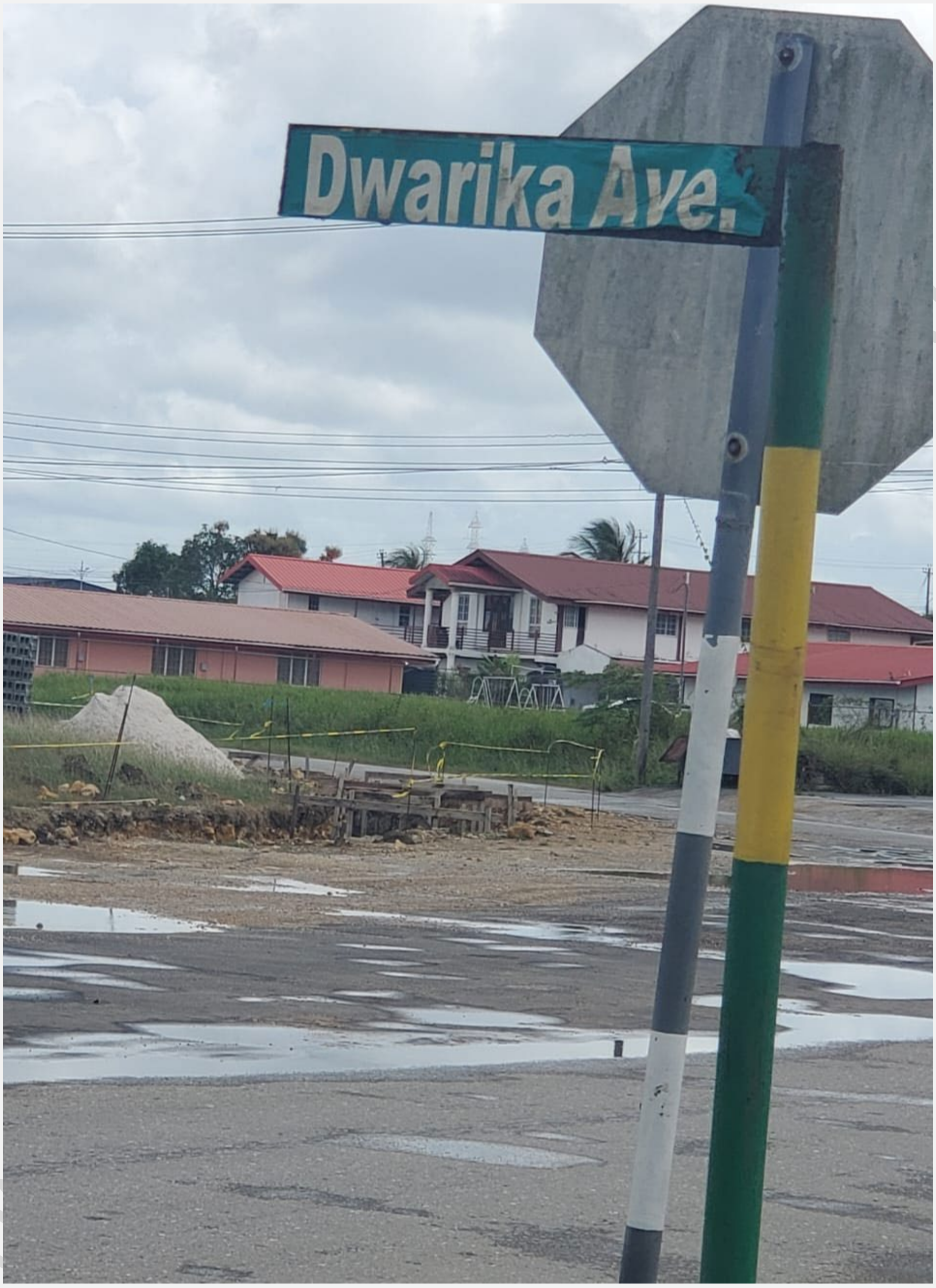


Dwarika Avenue, Debe, Trinidad

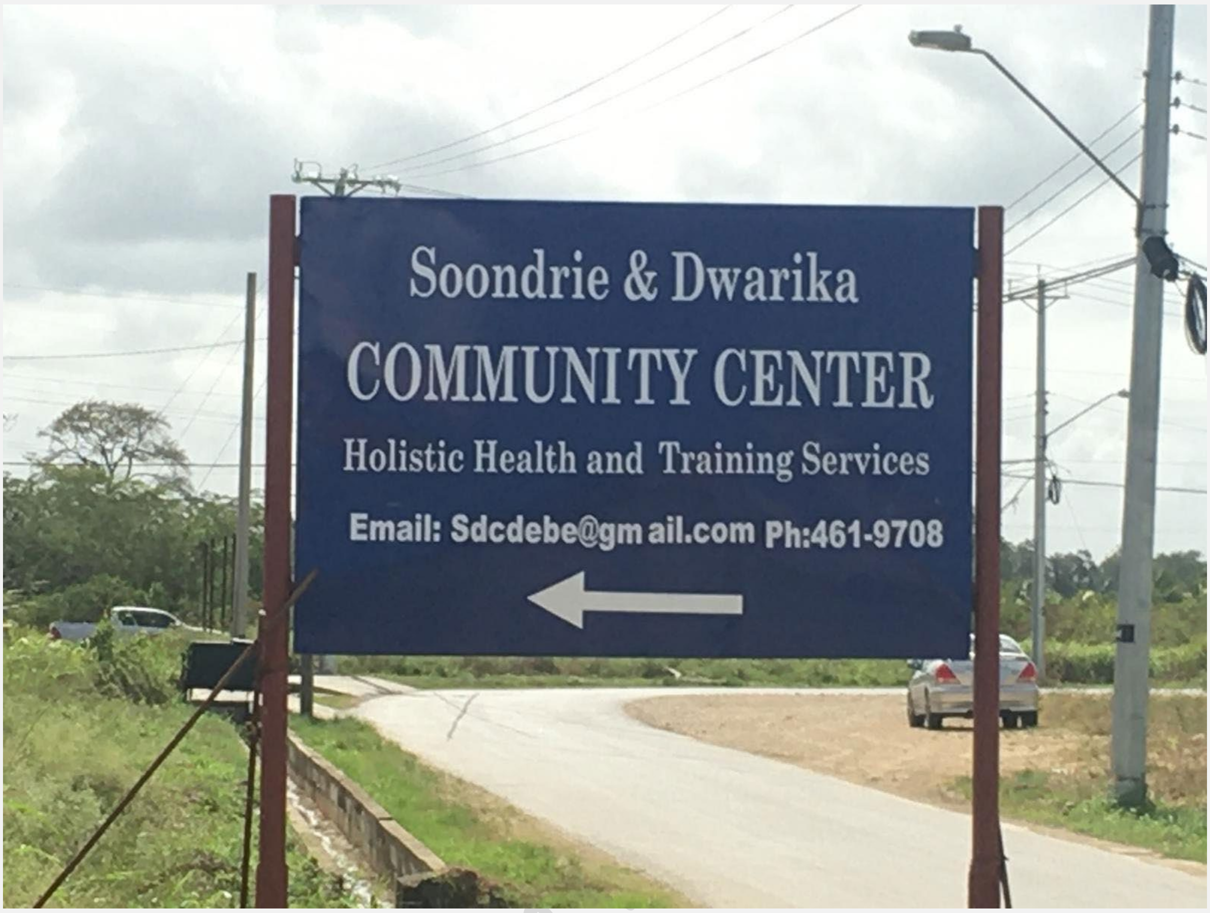


Dwarika Avenue family home today

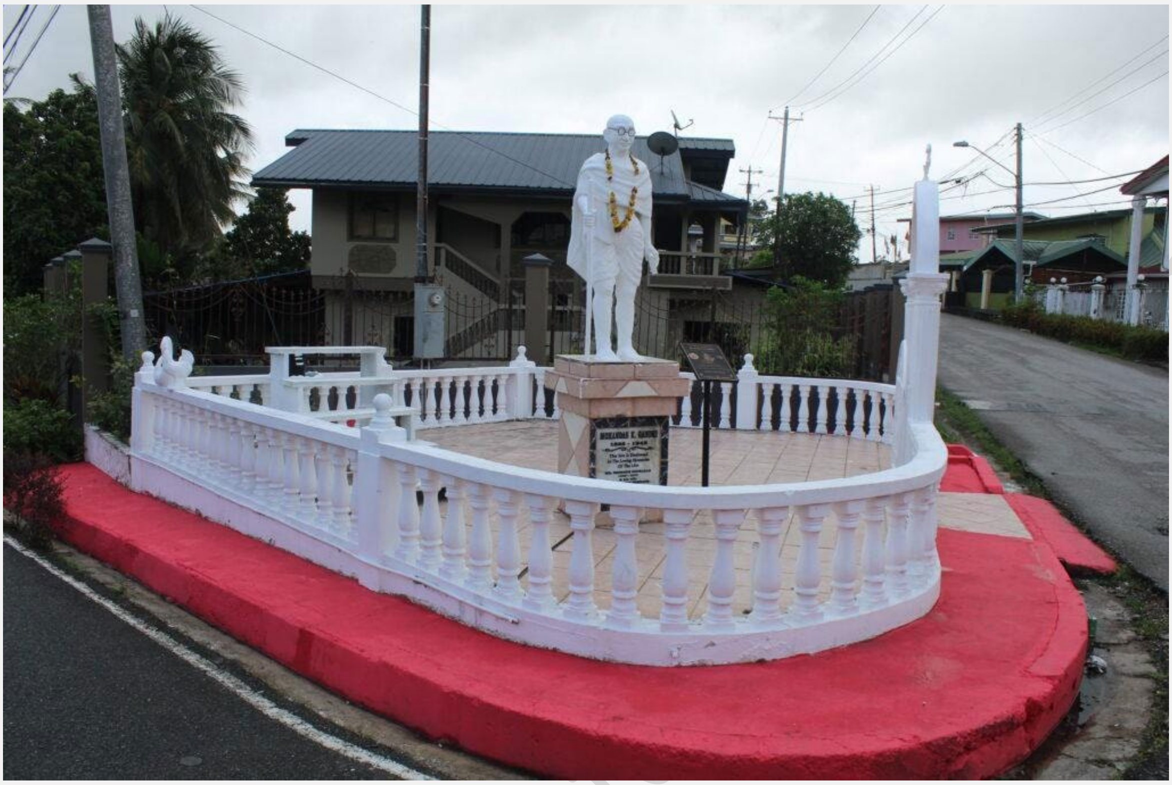
Family home today on Dwarika Avenue


Dwarika Ave.

Dwarika Avenue


Soondrie & Dwarika
COMMUNITY CENTER
Holistic Health and Training Services
Email: Sdcdebe@gm ail.com Ph:461-9708

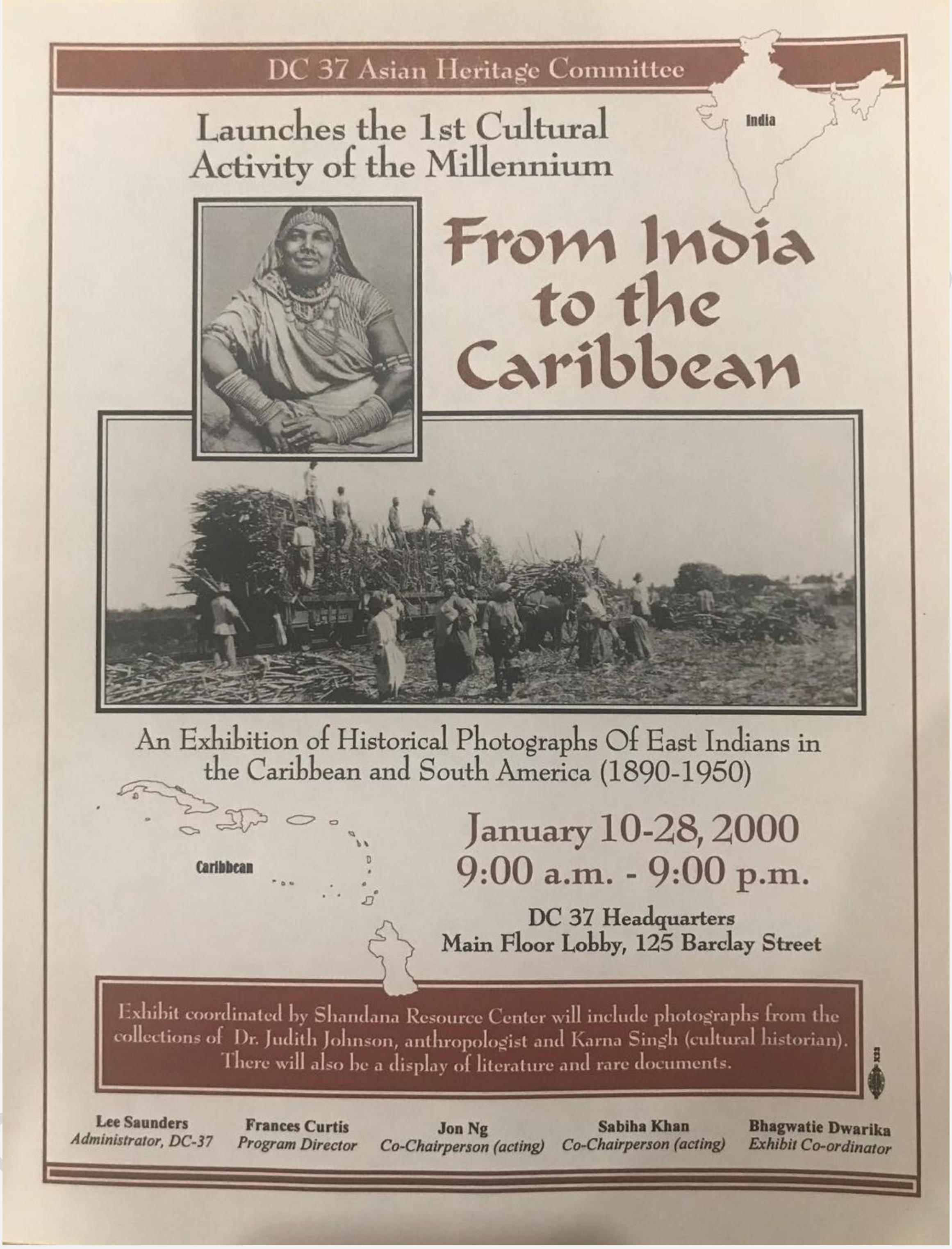
Soondrie & Dwarika Community Centre
DWARIKA AVE



Mahatma Gandhi statue in Gandhi Village

The green roof in the background on the right is the Dwarika Family home

(photo taken by Vijai Ramawad - great-grandson of Ramadhin Ramsahai)



DC 37 Asian Heritage Committee

Launches the 1st Cultural Activity of the Millennium

From India to the Caribbean

An Exhibition of Historical Photographs Of East Indians in the Caribbean and South America (1890-1950)

January 10-28, 2000
9:00 a.m. - 9:00 p.m.

DC 37 Headquarters
Main Floor Lobby, 125 Barclay Street

Exhibit coordinated by Shandana Resource Center will include photographs from the collections of Dr. Judith Johnson, anthropologist and Karna Singh (cultural historian). There will also be a display of literature and rare documents.

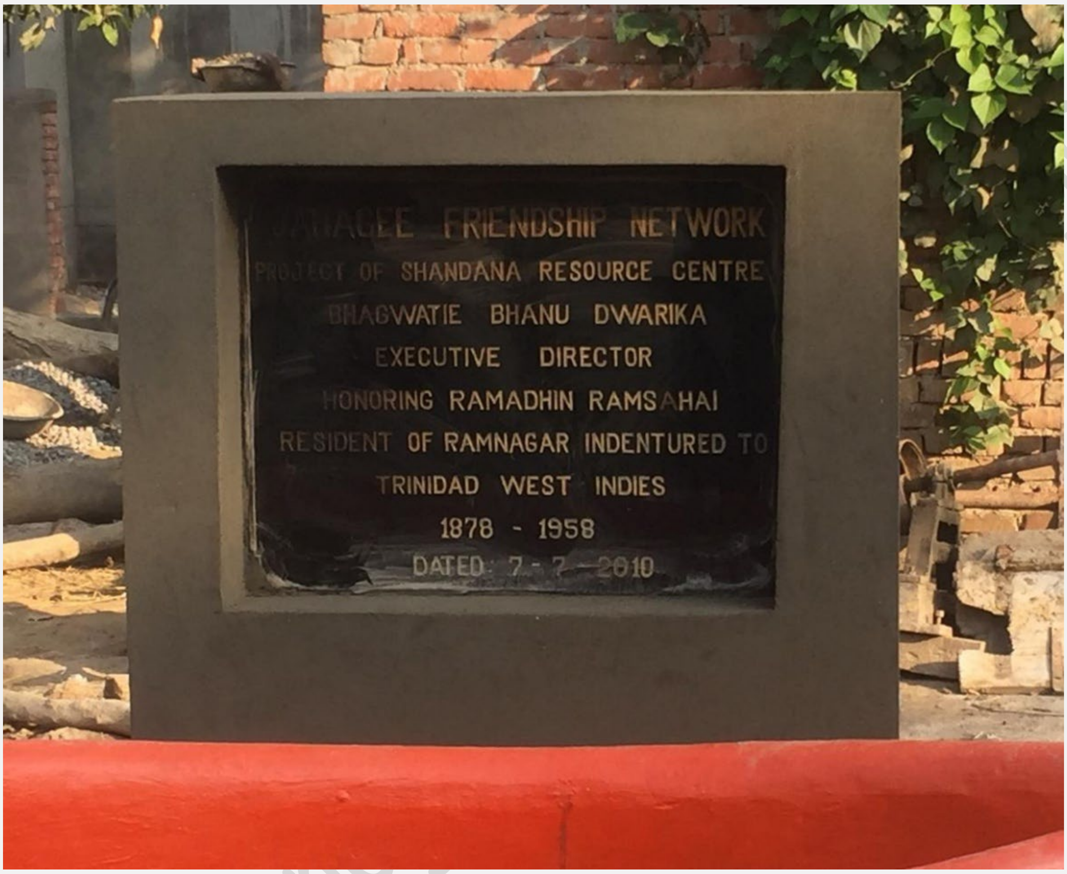
Lee Saunders
Administrator, DC-37

Frances Curtis
Program Director

Jon Ng
Co-Chairperson (acting)

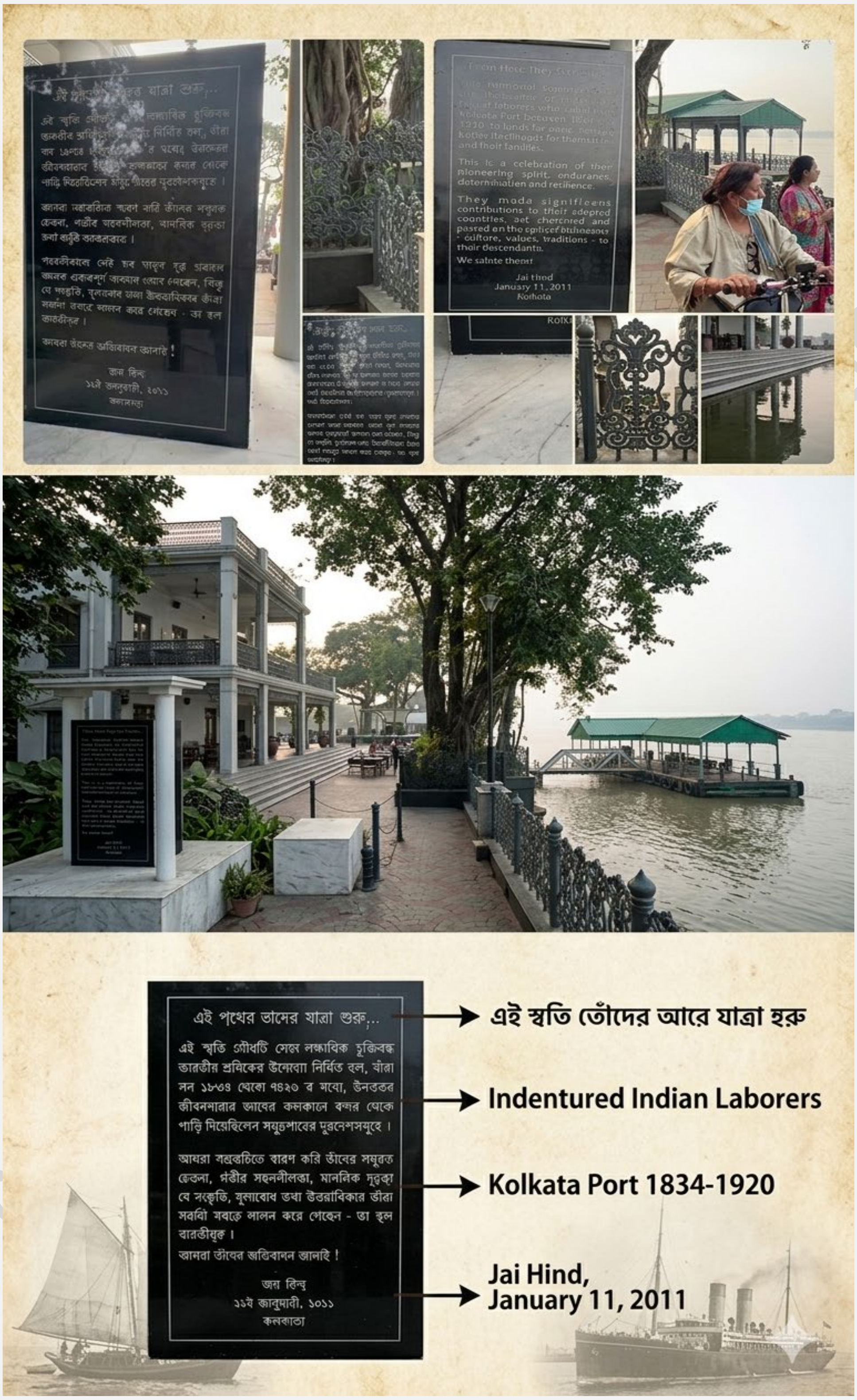
Sabiha Khan
Co-Chairperson (acting)

Bhagwatie Dwarika
Exhibit Co-ordinator


JAHAGEE FRIENDSHIP NETWORK
PROJECT OF SHANDANA RESOURCE CENTRE
BHAGWATIE BHANU DWARIKA
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
HONORING RAMADHIN RAMSAHAI
RESIDENT OF RAMNAGAR INDENTURED TO
TRINIDAD WEST INDIES
1878 - 1958
DATED: 7 - 7 - 2010

From Ramnaggr To Gandhi Village

Dr. Ajaz Rahi, Mrs. Nargis Ajaz, Shakeel Ajaz at DC 37 Asian Heritage Celebration, New York.



এই পথের তাদের যাত্রা শুরু...

এই স্মৃতি সৌধটি সেই লক্ষাধিক চুক্তিবদ্ধ ভারতীয় শ্রমিকের উদ্দেশ্যে নির্মিত হল, যাঁরা সন ১৮৩৪ থেকে ৭৪২০ র মধ্যে, উন্নততর জীবনধারার আশায় কলকাতা বন্দর থেকে পাড়ি দিয়েছিলেন সমুদ্রপারের দূরদেশসমূহে।

আমরা শ্রদ্ধচিত্তে স্মরণ করি তাঁদের অগ্রণী চেতনা, গভীর সহনশীলতা, মানসিক দৃঢ়তা যে সংস্কৃতি, মূল্যবোধ তথা উত্তরাধিকার তাঁরা সর্বদা সযত্নে লালন করে গেছেন - তা ছিল ভারতীয়ত্ব।

আমরা তাঁদের অভিবাদন জানাই!

জয় হিন্দ
১১ই জানুয়ারী, ২০১১
কলকাতা

এই স্বতি তোঁদের আরে যাত্রা হরু
Indentured Indian Laborers
Kolkata Port 1834-1920
Jai Hind,
January 11, 2011

Kolkata Port Memorial Monument

Dwarika-Ajaz family visit in January 2026

From Ramnagar to Gandhi Village

Ship name: ***RHONI (Reconstruction)***
A Story of Resilience and Survival of Indians in Trinidad

"The fragrance of soil never fades; it only migrates from one shore to another."

Adeel Ajaz Rahi

Is a columnist of nearly twenty years. His work has appeared in leading daily newspapers of Pakistan and international magazines, and has been translated into English, Hindi, Bhojpuri, Spanish, and French.

Contact: +923335113686 | ajazadeel@gmail.com

Bhagwatie Bhanu Dwarika

An educator, community leader, and trailblazer in the Indo-Caribbean community. She has dedicated her life to cultural preservation and empowerment. Her outstanding contributions were honored with the Government of Trinidad and Tobago Lifetime Achievement Award

Contact: bhanudwarika@gmail.com

FROM
RAMNAGAR
TO
GANDHI VILLAGE

In a powerful reflection on family, heritage, and the villages that shape who we become, Ramnagar generations and weaves this book known the strength of those who rise, everything familiar behind and carried their traditions, values, and memories into a new world.

With deep feeling and cultural richness, it explores the lasting bond between past and present. Ramnagar and bchanging registers and hopes. More than a personal account, it is a tribute to the people whose courage and quiet endurance made new lives possible for the generations that followed.

Tender, thoughtful, and rooted in remembrance, 'From Ramnagar to Gandhi Village' is a story of identity, resilience, and the ties that connect us home.

"For, anyone of path never fades; it only expands from one place to another."

Adeel Ajaz Rahi
Bhagwatie Bhanu Dwarika

FROM RAMNAGAR TO GANDHI VILLAGE